Of War and Legacies

In the light, there is darkness and in the darkness, light. It is the way with us all. Be a prisoner of neither the dark nor the light. Strive to live in balance. As Tython itself teaches us, it is dangerous to do so otherwise. And the danger is there—always.
-Master Ketu of the Je'daii Order

[-I-] 42 ABY

"Rise now and recite the Jedi Code as your forbearers have done eons past." Ben Skywalker heard Jedi Master Barratk'l's instructions and tried to keep his face 'Jedi serious' as he rose from his bended knee along with a dozen other, older Jedi.

Since the Swarm War nearly five years earlier, he had pushed himself as hard as he could to 'make a difference' in the Jedi Order. As a Skywalker, it was his duty to continue what his dad had started, it was his duty to emulate his cousins and become one of the youngest Jedi Knights of his era. It helped that one of his cousins in particular empathized with him and took him under his wing.

Jacen Solo had offered an apprenticeship position to Ben shortly after the events on that dark-side asteroid several years ago. To which the then twelve-year old boy had eagerly accepted. Now, a few years later, Ben hadn't regretted the choice at all. He had learned all sorts of things from his older cousin, had even begun to buy into the Unifying Force theory, much to his dad's chagrin.

Of course, with him being the youngest Jedi to be knighted since the Yuuzhan Vong War, and him being a Skywalker to boot, the press just had to be invited to what would have otherwise been a close, intimate ceremony on Ossus. Despite Jedi attempts to limit their influence over galactic affairs, Chief of State Kenth Hamner had proven surprisingly adept at utilizing the Jedi and getting results that made the galaxy ooh and ahh over the Order's prowess.

"There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. There is no chaos, there is harmony. There is no death, there is the Force," Ben felt himself repeat the age-old code of the Jedi, feeling as if a new purpose was filling his being. He was now on his way to becoming a Jedi Knight, like his father and *his* father before him. Despite the bright lights shining on him, he could see his family in the audience smiling in approval, and had to grin back in turn.

"You have all sworn an oath to defend and protect those in need, to make the galaxy stronger by forging alliances and fostering understanding. A Jedi Knight does not act for personal gain, will sacrifice his or her self if it means others can make a difference and keep the galaxy in balance. We are keepers of the peace, never

soldiers. Now ignite your sabers for the first time as Jedi Knights and be proud of all that you have accomplished today."
The rest of the ceremony was a blur for Ben, though he did remember walking off the stage without managing to trip or break character. He finally allowed himself to relax and drop his 'Jedi face' as he stepped off stage and into the throngs of waiting people. There was one person at the front of the crowd he immediately focused on though, his childhood best friend.
"Look at you, a Jedi Knight," a blonde and impish, Kani Asari greeted him with a smirk at the end of the ceremony. Her girl-next-door demeanor was always spiked with that hint of mischief.
"Look at me," Ben remarked back, holding out his arms to extend his baggy Jedi robes and doing a showy turn. He was already waiting for the hammer to fall though; Kani was waaay too good at keeping him humble.
"I am, I just don't see it," Kani said, mock scrutinizing him with her face scrunched up cutely. "Maybe it's the fact that all the other knights had more chin-hair than you."
"Two were Cathar! Another was Yuzzem! Three others were Chadra Fan! Of course they'd have more chin-hair than me!" Ben protested, swatting her hand away from his chin.
Kani's purple eyes shone with delight. "I *am* happy for you, Ben. You're crazy for going through all that to get your fancy title, but I'm still happy for you."
"Thanks," Ben smiled back.
"Now, I'd hug you, but if I see one more article declaring me the next Mrs. Skywalker, I'm going to do something to those poor holo-cam droids flying about."
Ben rolled his eyes and pulled the blond girl into a hug. "There, now I'm hugging you and not the other way around."
Kani just chuckled and returned the embrace quickly. She took a step back, well aware that the embrace had somehow attracted a swarm of the cameras like flitgnats. Ben might have become adjusted to having his life under a microscope, but her not so much.
"So, you've just become a Jedi Knight, what are you going to do next?"
"I don't know," Ben blinked. To tell the truth, he didn't exactly plan for what he might do *after* becoming a Jedi Knight. It was like graduating, spent so long having someone tell you how to act and what to do, and suddenly you're free to do what you please. "Maybe get a tattoo or something."
"A tattoo?" Kani raised a fine eyebrow.

"A crest of the Jedi Order on my arm or something," Ben mock-flexed to show off his nicely developed biceps.
"This I have to see," Kani laughed, poking at his arm playfully. "No wait, seeing your mom's reaction after the fact is something I have to see. Might as well add 'Property of the Jedi Order' under it."
"And what's this I have to see?" Mara Jade Skywalker approached the young pair with her husband and other son in tow.
"Ben's getting a tattoo," Kani said lightly. "Thinks it'll make him look more grown up."
"I thought apprentices were supposed to respect Jedi Knights," Ben said to his mom with a look of suffering on his face.
"I think best friends are exempt from that," thirteen-year old Janek Skywalker chimed in. "Congrats on your promotion, Ben."
"Thanks Janek," Ben mussed his brother's copper-toned hair.
"Ben!" Janek tried to duck away.
"A tattoo now?" Mara eyed her eldest.
"Hey, it's like a tradition with Knights these days," Ben said, holding up his hands. "Thann and Azil both got tattoos. So did Lharr and Cantor. You should be happy that I'm willing to just get the Jedi Order crest."
"Oh?"
"Yup, on his arm Thann has a naked wo…"
"You can stop there," Mara said.
"Wookie," Ben finished smartly, his best friend rolling her eyes next to him.
"Aren't all Wookies naked?" Janek asked, smirking in turn.
"Never mind your brother," Mara shook her head. "Farmboy, he's your son, you talk to him."
"Don't know what good that'll do," Luke chuckled. "I *am* proud of you for passing your trials, Ben."
"Thanks dad, but it's mostly thanks to Jacen for sticking to it all. The things he learned on his journey are amazing. Too bad he had another galactic crisis to attend to and couldn't be here though."
The family gathering was interrupted when the Chief of State himself approached with his entourage of ministers and aides.
"Chief of State," Mara greeted with an air of Hoth-level coolness in her voice.
"Ah, the Skywalkers," Kenth Hamner smiled broadly, the holocams still floating about. "You must be so proud, Master Skywalker, that your son is following in your footsteps."
"We are," Luke said mildly. "Here to convey your congratulations to Ben?"

"Of course," Kenth said, sounding like a used-speeder salesman as he rubbed his hands together. "And also to convey to you, Jedi Knight Ben Skywalker, your first mission."
"A mission?" Ben asked, his expression brightening despite the dark looks both Luke and Mara exchanged.
"Yes," Kenth nodded. "As you know, every Jedi is needed, and as a Knight, you are now more than qualified for an independent field assignment. Think of this as your inaugural act as a Jedi Knight. Provided the Grandmaster and the Jedi High Council agree of course."
It was strangely convenient that Kenth had three of the five masters on the council in his retinue. Luke merely kept his smile tight, the holocams not allowing for any other reaction. Kenth Hamner may have backed down from his attempt to also become a Grandmaster, but he had since pulled out all the stops to gain as much control of the Jedi Order's business as he possibly could. Added to the difficulties was the fact that he had used the Jedi *well* in his tenure as head of the galactic government and had made visible improvements throughout the galaxy. Luke couldn't very well go against Hamner without seeming controlling or showing favoritism, especially since it was now his son being sent out.
"What's the mission?" Kani spoke up, her purple eyes hard as she stood by her friend.
"This way, Jedi Knight Skywalker," Kenth directed Ben towards a side room. "For your ears only."
"You might as well let Apprentice Asari join us," Ben said casually, well aware of the political game being played. "I'll just tell her anyways."
"If that is your wish. This way please, the mission *is* time sensitive."
Kani exchanged a brief nod with Mara before taking a few steps to catch up with Ben and Kenth. The noise from the after-party lessened considerably when the door to the room slid shut once more. There the elder Jedi and statesman gave both young teens a once-over and then reached into his dress-uniform. He pulled out a datadisc and inserted it into the table's holoprojector.
"Your mission, Jedi Knight Skywalker," Kenth said evenly. "You are to act as an envoy to a group of disgruntled refugees in the Formos system."
"The Formos system?" Ben frowned, seeing how remote the location was on the holomap. "That's all the way out in the Outer Rim. Are they even part of the Galactic Alliance?"
"No," Kenth shook his head. "The political situation is complicated. Formos does lie on the Triellus Trade Route and heavily regulates trade into Rimward sectors such as the Tion Hegemony. The government of

nearby Aduba Three has taken advantage of the power vacuum in the region and has operational control of a majority of the Triellus Trade Route and many territories that were formally controlled by the Bothans, Hapans, and Hutts within the Hutt sector. The refugees at Formos are mostly from worlds that had been ravaged by the Vong that have yet to be rehabilitated. Aduba Three does not have the resources to repair these planets, and normally the Galactic Alliance doesn't either."
"So what's changed?"
"As you know, with the decline of the Hapans and Bothans in that part of space, the Galactic Alliance has minimal influence in that area of the Outer Rim. Before Aduba Three's rise, the systems were all mostly scattered, unaligned, and to be honest, a nightmare to deal with. But with Aduba Three bringing them in line, we now have a singular power base to negotiate with."
"You want me to go over there and negotiate a treaty?"
"Nothing of the sort," Kenth's smile barely made it to the corners of his mouth. "This is strictly a good-will mission."
"The fact that the Bakuran Hegemony has been making inroads towards that area of space doesn't factor into anything?" Kani spoke up, her sharp eyes drilling the Chief of State. "They control most of the trade in the southern Outer Rim area all the way to the Corellian Trade Spine. If they make a treaty with Aduba Three, the entire trade-network will be locked up."
"You're well informed, Apprentice Asari."
"I like to listen to the news," Kani replied beatifically. "Their annexation of Socorro and the starbase on Tythe caused a lot of mouths to flap."
"Er hmm, well, yes, as your friend has pointed out, Jedi Skywalker. The Bakurans have also taken note of Aduba Three, but they too can ill-afford to spend billions of credits so far away from their home sector. This is where the Jedi Order's connections to the Yuuzhan Vong come in. As a show of good will, and to help stabilize the Formos system—a system bursting at the seams with all the refugees—I'm counting on you to lead a team of shapers and help make some of those planets and moons in the system livable by using most of the GA's supply of specialized Yuuzhan Vong terraforming biots."
"And the fact that I'm the one going tells the Aduba government you truly do care about them," Ben said wryly. "Why can't you politicians ever do something easy? Send an official envoy, tell them what the GA has to offer them, and leave the Jedi Order out of a clearly political maneuver."

"If there was anything else at stake I would. But the Bakuran Hegemony's newly elected president, Malinza Thanas, has recently been locking down alliances left and right and if the Galactic Alliance wants to remain relevant out there, then we need to go all out."
"The Bakurans aren't our enemies, Chief of State," Ben said, a little confused.
"But they aren't fully allies either. Even with the stability of these past few years they still refuse to rejoin the Galactic Alliance. Member worlds have even opted to join the Hegemony because of pretty words and promises. With you and a team of shapers going to Formos, I'm letting the Aduba government know that the Galactic Alliance can achieve results and that we value them as partners and allies."
Ben just nodded slowly, absorbing the information so he could run it by his mother later on. Excited as he was about his first mission as a Jedi Knight, he was well aware he was being used to advance some backroom agenda.
"Put it this way, Jedi Knight Skywalker. If you decline this mission, millions of refugees in the Outer Rim won't have access to a home. The Yuuzhan Vong shapers don't trust Galactic Alliance forces to keep them safe that far away from the Core, but the name Skywalker guarantees their participation."
Ben looked across the table at Kani, raising a single eyebrow. Kani met it with an eyebrow-raise of her own. And just like that, their silent communication was over.
"Fine, I accept. Do I go it alone or do I have backup?"
"All other Knights and Masters are on assignment. Keeping a galaxy together requires the full participation of the Jedi Order."
"Then as a Knight, am I allowed to take apprentice-level Jedi with me?" Ben asked, knowing that Kani would kick his butt if he didn't bring her along.
Kenth smiled almost patronizingly in Kani's direction. "Of course Apprentice Asari is more than welcome to join your mission. You may recruit other apprentices if you desire, but no more than six. As I said, all Jedi, even apprentices are needed to help keep this galaxy spinning. I'm sure you are more than capable of doing this without the participation of older Jedi. After all, all you have to do is shake a few hands and supervise the Yuuzhan Vong for a couple of months."
"Right, what could go wrong?" Ben said dryly.
"I look forward to reading your after mission reports, good luck and may the Force be with you."
[-II-]

"Rise now and recite to me the words that define who we are, that have held us together since planetfall millennia ago."
Vestara Khai rose from bended knees, but still kept her head bowed at Grand Lord Darish Vol's order. After all, she was the lone figure, and the youngest—having been fifteen years of age for all of two days—standing before the Circle of Lords; the ruling body of Kesh made up of some of the most intelligent and powerful Force-users she had ever known.
"Peace is a lie," she began without hesitation, feeling as if she had ice water running through her veins. This is what all her training had led up to, all her suffering and trials. There was no way she would fail now. Her dark brown eyes were devoid of emotion as she continued her recitation. "There is only passion. Through passion, I gain strength. Through strength, I gain power. Through power, I gain victory. Through victory my chains are broken, the Force shall free me."
"Lady Rhea," the Grand Lord looked to a figure in the shadows. "You vouch for this Tyro?"
"I do, High Lord. She embodies the very spirit of what it means to be Sith, will no doubt take my place on this council some day."
"High praise, Tyro," the Grand Lord said to Vestara in a way that made the words sound more like a threat than a compliment. He activated his saber, its blood red length illuminating the side of Vestara's face. She held stone still, daring her body to betray the sudden surge of adrenaline that raced through her as she heard the saber buzz loudly by her ear. "But I am not as convinced. Tell me, Tyro Khai, is it true that knowing and understanding are two different things?"
"It is, Grand Lord," Vestara said in as even a voice as possible.
"Then answer me this. We gain our strength from our fear, our hatred and anger, correct?"
"No," Vestara said evenly, her eyes rooted to the marbled floor of the council room.
"Then pray tell what do we draw from?"
"Fear, hatred, anger, they do not strengthen us, but weaken us. But we must use it anyways because if we do not, it will use us in turn. It is our drive to make this galaxy a better place that powers us, our passion to see the galaxy in the image we wish it to be. Controlled, tamed to our will. Our true strength is this passion within us, what truly frees us from the fear and hatred that might chain us to our baser instincts. We are not diplomats, but soldiers, always fighting to tame the galaxy to a state that will serve us best."
The Grand Lord chuckled. "You parrot your master's words well, Tyro. Another question then." He shifted his lightsaber to her other shoulder.

"Suppose our situations were reverse. I kneeling before you, your lightsaber at my neck. If you were to kill me, you'd gain my position, my title, my lands, no repercussions to you. Tell me, what would you do?"
Vestara reigned in her first instinctive response, but then decided to go with it anyways. The worst he'd do was slice off her head after all. "I would remove your head, Grand Lord. If you were so foolish enough to put it in the way of my saber, you are clearly not worthy enough to lead this council."
At that, Vestara could feel amusement radiate from some of the council members and knew then that she had answered correctly.
"I see what you mean, Lady Rhea. She is indeed a Sith through and through."
"When have my students ever been anything less, Grand Lord," the voice of Vestara's master replied back with an air of arrogance.
The Grand Lord looked to a stalk-still Vestara without pity, then deactivated his lightsaber. "Truer words have never been spoken. Congratulations Vestara Khai, you are a Tyro no longer, you have earned the right to call yourself a Sith Saber, weapon of this council."
"I am deeply honored," Vestara bowed stiffly.
"I am sure," Darish Vol sniffed. He took his seat once more, joining the council in peering down on her. "Your father will be rewarded for your upbringing. You are dismissed."
"Thank you, Grand Lord."
Vestara didn't allow herself to breathe normally until the doors to the council chamber slammed shut behind her. She released a slow, relieved breath, her eyes fluttering close for a fraction of a second. She allowed herself no other reprieve because awaiting her, leaning against the wall by the door, was her training partner Keshiri Sith Tyro Ahri Raas.
"You lived, Ves. What a shame."
"If I didn't pass, my Master promised to make my afterlife a living nightmare. Binding spirits are second nature to her," Vestara remarked, forcing Ahri to fall into stride with her. They weren't exactly friends, but they weren't enemies either. His family and hers were not exactly in the same strata of the complicated Keshiri political system, and she would be stupid to think that anything could happen between the two of them. Even then, he had been her sparring partner for as long as she could remember and his presence was somewhat comforting after the icy coldness of the Circle of Lords chamber. "You planning to take the trials any time soon?"

"And get my head cut off by the Grand Lord? We both know he hates the thought of another Keshiri rising to prominence," Ahri said, his lavender-colored skin making his species obvious to any who saw him.
"Why do you think I'm asking," Vestara said with a wicked smile. "I think you'd look a lot prettier without that unsightly mess on your shoulders."
"Funny, I was about to say the same. Only a brain-dead Jedi would find that face of yours attractive."Ahri shot back.
"Funny," Vestara said sourly. "Seen my father around by any chance?"
"Think he's still waiting back at your house. Didn't want to be within striking distance of the council if you failed to impress."
"I'm sure my master will be pleased with that," Vestara rolled her eyes. "And here he's told me that I've always excelled at being a Sith."
"If we still practiced those inane traditions of choosing a sacrifice, I bet I know who'd you choose."
"So kind of you to offer yourself in such a way."
The sound of a throat clearing caused both teens to freeze in their tracks. They immediately recognized the Force presence behind them.
"Tyro Raas, leave us."
"Yes, Grand Lord," Ahri inclined his head in a short bow and quickly continued down the hallway.
"Grand Lord," Vestara bowed low, mentally cursing Ahri's cowardice and wondering why should thought his presence had been comforting in the first place. Not that she needed him at her side anyways. But she clearly knew where he stood were it a matter of life and death, hers and his.
"Rise, Saber. After a short conversation with the others, we have decided to assign you a mission off-planet."
"In Ship?" Vestara's eyes widened, unable to contain her excitement. It was common knowledge that a relic vessel of the old days had landed on Kesh, had arrived two years earlier and had since been updating everyone as to the status of the rest of the galaxy. It had caused quite the upheaval of the status quo and renewed hope of a Sith Empire reborn among the most fanatical.
"Yes," the Grand Lord said almost bitterly. "In fact, the vessel requested you itself."
"Me? But I just made Saber."
"Do not question me, Saber," Darish Vol snapped.
"Forgive me, my lord."
"I have selected a team to accompany you. Apparently the vessel thinks it is time we begin our expansion outside this system."

Vestara did her best to control her thoughts and emotions. She knew from her father that Darish Vol had tried to claim himself master of the sentient vessel, and then had been promptly humiliated when the vessel locked him out. In fact, to the best of anyone's knowledge, it had always deemed their tribe inferior and incapable of restoring the Sith to the galaxy. Yet Ship continued to stay on Kesh and teach them all about details that might have been lost or corrupted in their millennia of isolation.
"I…I am honored, my Lord. To where am I headed?"
"The Bheriz system. Our databanks say that before the Stranding, it had many prosperous planets rich in mineral resources. The ship claims that most of its mines are now barren, but that the location is strategic in value. A government called the Aduba Starhoppers control the region. You will learn more from the ship when you meet with it. Now out of my sight and return victorious or not at all."
"For the Tribe," Vestara clasped a fist over her chest.
[-III-]
"Great, Fearless Leader, your first official mission," Kani smirked, reclined in the shiny, black leather chair of the ship's meeting room. After all the bells and whistles of the knighting ceremony and mission debriefing, the political games didn't end. Ben Skywalker was 'given' a brand new Corellian tactical freighter VCX-2000 for his team's personal use—after all it was only right that a 'Skywalker' had his own ship. Speeds nearing that of the fabled *Millennium Falcon*, the VCX series freighter was the direct descendant of the G-series freighters; known for their speed and firepower. Its cargobays were chock full of supplies, credits, and Yuuzhan Vong biots, everything the number-crunchers said the team would need to complete the mission.
"Don't start," Ben groaned.
"Aren't you our Fearless Leader, though? Should have put that under the tat on your arm," The team's healer in training, fourteen year old Josat, chimed in with a smirk. He was referring to the New Jedi Order emblem that Ben had on his left shoulder. "I can also recite the adjectives that holovid used to describe you as they boasted about your first official mission. 'The Next Face of the Jedi…'"
"Please don't, Chatterbox. Why did I invite you again?"
"Because your cousin Cassa told you too," the fourth member of their team said. Also at fourteen, the Cathar Jun Rasi Tuum chuckled. Attached to his chest was a Yuuzhan Vong biologically engineered symbiote that kept his breathing normal. "Said something about you not being her favorite cousin any more if you didn't."

"Like Master Tekli always tells me, it pays to have connections," Josat said airily.
"And Kani invited me along so she wouldn't be the only girl," the last Jedi in the group, Melodie Jedi Cappricia, chimed in.
"Please, I can handle these boys. I invited you so you could see more of the galaxy than just the Ossus libraries, Fishsticks," Kani said dryly, lobbing a towel at the younger teen.
"But the libraries are so amazing," Cappricia protested. "All that knowledge!"
"Trust me, seeing things for real instead of a vid-screen is a lot better," Kani said with a shake of her head.
"Pardon the interruption," a stilted Basic-speaker said.
The group of young Jedi twitched slightly, having not detected the approach of one of the other half of the team. A Yuuzhan Vong shaper was standing off to the side of the table they had been around, his head slightly bowed. To the surprise of Ben and Kani, Josat responded to the shaper's interruption in what seemed to be perfect Yuuzhan Vong.
"What did you say to him?" Cappricia asked curiously.
Sensing their raised eyebrows, Josat blushed slightly. "Just told him it was okay to approach…or something like that, a lot is lost in translation to Basic."
"When did you pick up Vongese?" Ben said, impressed.
Josat then blushed for real this time. "I…I've kind of had Cassa Solo teaching me. Jun knows some words too. We're both working with shapers and Yuuzhan Vong biots for his lung problem so I thought it'd be handy if we could cut the translation time and learn how to speak it."
"Nice," Ben whistled. He then looked to the shaper. "What Josat said. It's alright you weren't interrupting anything. Master Shaper Aeri."
"Thank you, Your Eminence."
"Just Ben," Ben Skywalker insisted, shooting a glare at his silently laughing 'best' friend.
"Yes…Ben," the scarred Shaper tried. He gestured to the gathered Jedi. "We of Domain Paasar just want to thank you for allowing us to redeem the name of our people in the eyes of those who live in the systems we will restore. Though we were once warriors, the freedom the Jedi gave us to choose what we want from life has enabled us to learn how to heal the damage we have created. We know as Jedi that you could be doing other more glorious tasks befitting of people of your legendary…."

"Stop right there," Ben exhaled, doing his best not to roll his eyes. "I might be a Jedi, I might be a Skywalker, but I'm still just one person in a galaxy of quadrillions. Now please, no bowing, no thanking us, we're just doing our jobs, as are you."
"How much hostility do you anticipate Ben?" Aeri asked. "We of Paasar have sworn away the amphistaff and coufee as proof of our dedication to healing the galaxy. We have no offensive weaponry."
"We'll keep things civil, don't worry about that," Jun spoke up. "There might be a few grieving and angry refugees, but if they know you have the power to make their homes livable again, they'll hold off."
"We hope," Kani said evenly. "We won't lie to you, Shaper. There are a *lot* of angry people where we're going. If things get dangerous, your desire to redeem the name of your people will have to wait. As you can tell, none of us are the soldier-y type of Jedi."
"Healer," Josat volunteered.
"Bookworm," Cappricia chirped with a grin.
"We don't need to be combat-Jedi, this is a mission of peace after all," Ben said wryly. "Let us handle the unruly masses. Restoring planets probably are not going to be an overnight thing, right?"
"It will take several galactic months just for the process to begin to take hold," confirmed the shaper.
"See, so plenty of time for the locals and refugees to get to know us and learn about all our charming personalities," Ben said. "Chatterbox can soften them up, Fishsticks can impress them with all those codeci in her head, Hairball can show them that the Yuuzhan Vong actually do good, and once the masses like us, we send in Kani to seal a deal."
"What about you, oh Fearless Leader?" Kani deadpanned.
"Yeah what will you be…Wait a minute, how come Kani didn't get a nickname?" Cappricia protested.
"I will be posing and looking good for the holocams, oh and practicing my handshaking skills," Ben said with a smug grin. "And Kani doesn't have a nickname because my self-preservation instincts kick in whenever one's about to leave my mouth."
"She can read your mind you know," Josat said.
"Maybe that's why I feel a shiver down my spine whenever I think of a nickname," Ben chuckled, earning him a light tap on his shoulder from his best friend. He then sobered and looked back to the healer. "You have the word of my family that we'll do everything we can to protect you and your adepts."
"Appreciated, Ben."
"Do you have to be so formal and serious?" Ben asked curiously. "I mean, this is just a routine 'repair damaged worlds' mission. At most

we'll be up against one or two disgruntled refugees, but nothing to worry about, really. Most of the time will be spent hanging out at the regional HQ looking good for whoever shows up. It's a mission, but it's of the milk-run variety."
"We are Yuuzhan Vong. From a young age, we were bred to expect the unexpected. Yun-Shuno and Yun-Ne'shel will always test us in ways we can never anticipate."
"Alright then," Ben sighed. "But after the first few months with nothing happening, I'm sure you'll see how tiring it is to be serious *all* the time."
"We shall see."
[-IV-]
"Saber Khai." Vestara heard the voice of Aris Zin, one of the Sith Tyros assigned to the mission, interrupt her meditations.
"What is it, Tyro?"
"Apologies for the intrusion, but your team has been assembled and is awaiting your presence."
"I will address the team when *I* am ready, Tyro," Vestara's voice promised a quick death if he continued to intrude. The Tyro bowed his head low and backed out of the room.
With the door sealed, Vestara re-immersed herself in the Force and resumed her kneeling position in the center of the icy cold room.
Why pick me, Ship? I am neither the strongest, nor the wisest of the Tribe.
You embody that which is Sith, the thoughts echoed through her mind, cold and calculating. *Seek to rise beyond the stale teachings of your stagnant people. To be a Sith is more than just reciting dogmas, interpreting the words of people long dead. You have to* ***feel*** *it in your every cell, know that in your very essence, you are Sith.*
I am but a newly minted Saber, would not any Lord or La...
You are not listening! The ship's mental message battered Vestara's mind causing her to inhale sharply in pain. *I chose you because of the potential I sensed. You are destined to return the Sith to their glory, not your so-called Lords and Ladies of the Sith. Anyone can pick up a title, and with enough fear and power keep it. But the Sith of my era would laugh at what your Tribe has become. Would not even devote resources to annihilate a peoples who are so incompetent that they cannot see themselves a doomed race.*
"What would you have me do?" Vestara voiced aloud. "I cannot go against the Council. You may not believe in titles, but all of my people do."

That is why I have demanded you take part in this mission. I will make you invaluable to your people, make it so that your word means more to them than the entire council.
"I turned fifteen only a week ago. There has to be others in the tribe who are older and more experienced."
*Age is irrelevant. You will do as I bid and raise your people up or you will die in the attempt. You told me you wished to become a master of the Sith arts, that you wish for your people to transcend their current status in life. A true Sith always accomplishes what he or she sets out to do. And you **are** a true Sith. Now go tend to those the council has foolishly put with you. Just know that while they are all expendable, you are not.*
"Understood, I thank you for this chance." Vestara rose from her kneeling position in the center of the meditation chamber. "I will prove you have not made a mistake in selecting me to be your emissary."
In the dim red light that filled the room, Vestara caught the sight of her own reflection on one of the polished metal panels, the freshly inked Sith tattoos that denoted her Saber rank stood out in stark contrast to her pale face. A constant reminder of who she was, of her identity. She was Sith, master of her own life and the life she wished to live.
Making sure her black hooded robes were straightened, she released one final breath and let her emotional barriers rise to impenetrable levels. She then affixed to her face a war-mask made in the same style that her ancestors had worn many thousands of years ago. The actual battles might be lightyears away, but there were battles of a different sort that awaited her outside the featureless durasteel door.
Those on the other side were not her friends, were the furthest thing from allies she could have. They were all there, waiting for her to falter so they could swoop in and claim the glory for their families, for their master, and for the Council. But *she* was not about to let that happen.
The door to the room slid open again and she stepped out into the intake bay of the spherical vessel. Ship itself was not very large, meant really for one or two people, not twelve. Over the coming months, those onboard were going to get to know each other very well, would have to sleep in shifts. Vestara mentally grimaced. Cramped and uncomfortable dark Jedi were not the most fun to hang out with.
The door slid shut behind her. At once seven Tyros lowered themselves to one knee while the four Sabers also on the mission exchanged bored nods.
"Well?" The cold blue eyes of Vran, a Saber almost ten years older than herself, threatened to beat her down with its penetrating powers.

"Watch your tone, Saber," Vestara snapped, her voice distorted by her mask. She would not let herself be intimidated by the mountain of a man. "The Council decreed that *I* am the leader of this mission, it is *you* who will report to me and not the other way around."
"My brother simply wished to know if the Ship has imparted any words of wisdom before we leave this system," Sith Saber Kaara voiced in an almost eerie whisper. "None of us have even left the planet before."
"I am aware of that," Vestara said curtly. Kaara was older than her by three years , but was also a newly minted Saber. Not that Vestara felt any sense of camaraderie with the dark-haired teen; without even trying she could sense Kaara's lust for power, for prestige and acknowledgment. "And if the Ship had any information for you, it would have informed you itself. Seeing as how it has not told you anything, it obviously believes that its wisdom is not meant for you. We have our orders and our target. Ours is not to question the orders but to carry them out. For the Tribe."
"For the Tribe," the others repeated on instinct.
"What are our orders, Ves?" Ahri Raas sad, still on one knee and head bowed low so that she could only see the white hair atop his head.
"Saber Khai to you, Tyro," Saber Kayala corrected darkly.
"The Bheriz system is our first destination," Vestara ignored the interplay. Ahri might be the closest thing she had to a friend, but in front of the others, she could not afford to play favorites. "A convoy of materials meant for the worlds in a nearby system will be passing through when we arrive. Our goal is to take the convoy, force the local authorities to send gunships and support, and then with the help of Ship claim those ships for the Tribe. At that point one of you will be taking our spoils back to Kesh and the rest of us will build our Tribe's armada."
"Great and powerful Sith reduced to piracy?" Sneered Vran.
"If you would like to recommend we assault, hold, and then repurpose a shipyard with just us, by all means, Vran," Ahri spoke up boldly.
A red blade shot out from Vran's saber and nearly cleaved Ahri's head from his shoulders. Vestara's own purple saber, however, intercepted it with barely millimeters to spare, the energy blades singing the pale hairs on Ahri's neck.
"He is a Tyro, he should have learned his station long ago."
"He is also smarter than you Vran," Vestara remarked darkly, swatting his blade aside. "If you were leading us we'd all be dead in the first engagement. You're the saber-staff, the muscle, stop thinking above *your* station. We'll arrive at our destination at the end of the week and have another week to plan and execute our attack."

"Are we taking prisoners?" Tyro Aris Zin asked.
"Remember the code, Tyro," Vestara said tonelessly. "Unless their continued existence benefits us, why waste resources to keep them alive. Our goal is to build a fleet for our Tribe and pave the way for their return. *Nothing* is going to stop us."
[-V-]
"This is Jedi Order transport *Dawn* to Formos Control, our arrival is expected," Ben Skywalker said, toggling the comm and waiting for a reply. In the distance was the planet Formos, an unimpressive brown and yellow sphere rotating in space. But what really caught everyone's eyes was what was surrounding the planet. In what could only be described as a giant construct of starships interlinked by various airlocks and enclosed walkways; it was as if Formos had developed a ring of ships in the span of a decade and a half since the end of the Vong War.
"That's a lot of ships," Jun Rasi Tuum whistled.
"A lot of people too," Josat answered, subdued. "A lot of unhappy, suffering people."
"How many refugees were we supposed to deal with?" Kani said, aghast. "This is way more than Chief of State Hamner said there would be. Their reports said only a few million!"
"Good thing we're here then," Cappricia said, glancing to the others. "Millions or billions, it our duty as Jedi to help, right? Nothing's going to stop us."
"Maybe," Ben answered , feeling slightly overwhelmed by all the life he felt in orbit around the planet. All the life he was soon going to decide the fates for. He could feel his heart thump loudly, his mouth drying at the sheer scale of the task made visible before him. Kani's hand reached out and covered his own, and he turned his hand over so they could interlace their fingers.
Josat had been right. Many of those in orbit were suffering, had been for a very long time, and the Force was letting Ben and Kani feel it in unvarnished darkness. It was like feeling the Yuuzhan Vong War all over again, the echoes of the lasting pain and agony it had inflicted on the refugees pulsating relentlessly like a giant beacon. His breath came out in shorter gasps, his grip on Kani's hand tightening just as hers did the same to his. Together, just as they had done when they had been younger and in the Ossus Praxeum, they slowly pulled themselves out of the morass of despair and negative energies of the Force.
"Ben?" Cappricia said, picking up on the change in mood.

"I'm okay," Ben said hoarsely. "Just all those people caught me off guard."
The comm unit crackled to life, drawing the Jedi away from the ring of ships.
"*Dawn this if Formos Control, welcome to our little end of the galaxy—population nine-point-eight billion. Proceed to hangar bay Dorn-Senth-Niner at one-third sub-light*."
Ben wiped at his eyes and swallowed, before replying. "I copy Formos Control, setting course now."
"Look over there," Cappricia had her face almost pressed to the viewpoint as her yellow eyes rapidly tracked the solid ring of ships orbiting Formos. "That entire section has to be made up of Kubaz ships. I recognize their design from the temple archives. You see those sloped pods on the back? They're actually hatcheries and are the heaviest shielded area of the ship. That part of the ship seals itself off and ejects itself if a hull breach occurs in the rest of the ship."
"That's only fifteen or so ships," Josat spoke up. "Look at that cluster over there! It looks like they have their own starfighter squadrons and everything. Like it's some type of nation-state in space. They're not really connected to the rest of that grouping and those surplus V-wings look to be keeping out the other ships that don't have that weird marking. There has to be over a hundred ships over there, and some look ancient."
"The briefings we got never said anything about this many people." Kani almost whispered again, her hand reflexively squeezing Ben's once more. "And we're supposed to help all of them somehow?"
"Over there!" Jun exclaimed in alarm, jabbing his fur-covered hands at another sight.
The young teens peered into the direction he was pointing and had to blink in amazement as over a dozen combat ships started a deadly skirmish around several larger civilian vessels. After a few minutes of heavy fighting, one side backed down and this new group appeared to tractor-beam the larger ship out of its current orbit and into a new one.
"They're fighting for supplies," Ben said, immediately understanding what they were seeing. "Nearly ten billion people. Records show that the population in this system rarely rose above ten-thousand before the Vong War."
"Only the strongest can survive," Kani agreed softly. "This is what billions of people have been reduced to, a bunch of nexu fighting for another meal."
"The sooner we can start giving these people a home, the better." Jun said firmly.

Their ship rocked slightly as it entered Formos' atmosphere, yellow, sulfurous clouds parting quickly. The ground of Formos was mostly rocky and barren, the few pre-fab structures that dotted the ground were clustered around the planet's lone spaceport.
A lone, heavily fortified spaceport.
"That place has more turbolasers than the Denon Senate Building," Kani whistled, her purple eyes counting the many emplacements that littered their destination. It didn't help that almost half of them had turned to acquire a target lock on them as they descended.
"They do know we're friendly, right?" a worried Cappricia breathed.
Ben toggled his comm. "All those guns for us, Formos Control?"
"*Can't be too careful these days, Dawn*. *You've seen the crowd that hangs out in orbit yourself.*"
"Point. But the only things we have to declare are relief supplies and people wanting to help you out."
"*True, blowing away a Skywalker would probably be…eeeh….bad news for everyone*," a new voice replied. "*I'm having my people stand down. See you planet side.*"
The turrets all returned to their heaven-side gaze, and the crew of the *Dawn* breathed a little easier. The young Jedi all exchanged nervous grins, their eyes keeping track of the happenings in their fast-approaching destination.
The hangar they had been directed to was evidently a military one if all the fighters in the hangar were any indication.
"Look at all those Hornets," Jun blinked at the bee-shaped fighters docked in the front. "And those Corellian 500s and K-Wings. I thought this was supposed to be some out of the way backwater, not a military stronghold."
"Probably still is, but I'd get nervous too if several billion people decided to park in orbit above my planet," Ben reasoned. "They need some way to keep the peace, and holding a big gun to their heads sometimes does it."
The *Dawn* shook slightly as it landed, the welcoming committee already outside and waiting.
"Is that…a giant rabbit?" Cappricia gaped. She had just torn her eyes from the cockpit window to join the others at the ramp, when she did a double-take. The figure that had caught her attention was hard to miss, even from a distance. It wasn't every day one saw a nearly two-meter tall green rabbit dressed in armor with several blasters strapped to his side and a flamethrower on his back.
"Lepi," Ben chuckled. "That's his race. Uncle Han told me a story once about working with one of their people before."

"We shall wait in the ship," the Yuuzhan Vong Master Shaper said calmly. "This far out, there is no use fanning the flames of hatred. We'll emerge when you signal us."
"Good idea," Ben said solemnly. "Don't worry, we'll get you the chance you're looking for."
"We know," Aeri said patiently. "Good luck with your initial negotiations."
"Thanks."
The ramp finished its cycling and lowered to let the Jedi out into the hangar.
"Welcome to Formos," the green bipedal rabbit Cappricia had seen from the window greeted, gnawing on an orange, root-like vegetable as he did. "The name's Nugget, governor of…"
Josat hadn't been able to stop himself from sniggering. A flash of annoyance crossed the pink-eyes of Nugget and the Lepi drew two blasters faster than the young Jedi could react.
"Think that's funny do you?" Sneered Nugget, the whine of the blasters charging filling the hangar.
"No sir, sorry sir," Josat gulped.
"Thought so." Nugget holstered his weapons and resumed chewing on the root in his mouth. "Eeeeh, as I was saying, I'm the governor of this system. With me are my two most useful associates Mei and Ack. Mei is my Chief of Security and Ack is my Chief of Refugee Business."
The Jedi looked at the two henchmen on either side of the governor. Nearly as tall as Nugget, Mei was as mercenary as a Bith could look, wearing a trench-coat over heavy durasteel armor plating, with wrist-launchers on either arm and a bandoleer slung across his shoulder. Ack appeared to be just the opposite, a Chadra-Fan, with a backpack larger than his small form and robes that looked to be made of the finest of silks.
"Pleased to meet you," Ben said with a diplomatic smile.
Nugget finished chewing and nodded. "Right, now I assume you're here because the Galactic Alliance wants to look good for us Starhoppers?"
"Is that what the government of Aduba Three call themselves?" Ben asked, walking alongside the governor out of the hangar.
"It was the name of the gang pops ran around with before settling down and having a den of his own," Nugget confirmed. "Got himself elected to lead those band of misfits and when the Hutts beat feet out of here and, he took over. With the Vong War decimating the Tenloss Syndicate's power base, can't believe the idiots actually supported the Peace Brigade, the Starhoppers are the only ones left out here. There are definite benefits to having three dozen brothers and sisters."

"Three-dozen!" Jun mouthed silently in shock behind the rabbit's back.
"So each of your brothers or sisters is in charge of a system?"
"Only the more responsible ones in our family," Nugget chuckled. "You wouldn't want to put some of my brothers and sisters in charge of a dejaarik table even if your life depended on it. Anyways, not that your arrival isn't appreciated or anything, but unless you can actually contribute something besides your last name, I don't have much use for you."
"We've brought a Yuuzhan Vong Shaper team with us as well as many metric tons of relief supplies and materials to terraform a handful of planets." Kani voiced.
"Great, you really want to start a panic, let the word that you have Vong on your ship reach those yahoos in orbit. We only have enough power to fire half our turbolaser batteries at one time. The others are just for show. The yahoos up there know it, but keep each other in check. Which is lucky for us down here."
"How *is* the situation in this system?" Josat asked. "Food, medical supplies…"
"You saw that skirmish on your way down, you tell me," Nugget answered with a click of his tongue. He passed a trash bin and discarded the remnants of his snack with a careless toss. "What supplies we do have aren't going to last long. We have the convoys we get from Aduba, but with billions of mouths to feed, they disappear almost as soon as we get it. Forget medical supplies, those were used up pretty quickly. Out here, if you get anything more than a flesh-wound, you can kiss your pretty rear-end good bye."
"Do you have a triage center at least?" Josat frowned.
"Located next to the morgue, why?"
"I'm a healer, well, one in training. If we can pool those with medical training, we might be able to save a few more lives."
"Kid, weren't you listening? That's the last thing we want out here, more mouths to feed and bodies to house. Our food-ships are at their limit and breaking down. Environmental and CO-two scrubbers are wearing out. Heck, even all the garbage they've generated has become a navigation hazard—we lost a storage ship when micro-fragments punched through its engine block. As good as healing the sick might sound, it's more of a mercy to let them die at the moment. At least that way they won't take everyone else down with them."
"Well now that we're here, we might be able to start fixing up some of the planets in the sector," Ben backed up the younger Jedi. "So you might as well start making sure that those who can be saved are."

"And who decides who gets first crack?" Nugget said dismissively. "I told you before, my guns only half-work. My militia numbers in the hundreds. And all the starfighers you saw in that hangar look great and all, but I have no pilots for them. We open an actual med-center and we'll have a stampede of people trying to get to it. Those with the most credits and biggest guns will get there first. Those who really need the care will still be up in orbit dying slowly. I don't have the manpower to keep things civil. As it is, you Jedi have come at an inconvenient time. We're currently expecting a supply convoy from Aduba Three so resources are their lowest yet."
"Do you normally wait until they're that low?" Kani asked, curious.
"Of course not. But we absorbed several hundred thousand more refugees when the government of Dubrava flopped last month. When they flopped, so did the trade route, so aid through the Bheriz sector now takes an additional week to get here. If you Jedi do have a magic-planet-be-better spell in your book of tricks, it's more than welcome. I don't need the Force to know that Formos can't last much longer, even with Aduba's help. All we really need is one missed shipment and we have thousands die of starvation, and desperation kicks in."
"Is there anywhere you'd like us to start?"
Nugget cast a sidelong glance to Ben. "Don't suppose your Vong buddies can give this planet a make-over? If more of it were able to sustain farming then we wouldn't have to import so much food."
"That shouldn't be a problem," Ben nodded.
"Great, then after this planet you can give the other planets in this system a redo as well. Formos Besh was once the major farming hub in this system, but the Vong turned it into a desert. The fourth planet, Asa, and the fifth, Arkan, once supported life. But thanks to the Vong again, Asa is a molten ball of space-rock and Arkan is in pieces."
"We'll have a look at the planets, but even if they are viable for a restoration, it will take time," Ben said patiently.
"That's something we don't have much of. I need to start settling the people in orbit before they tear each other to bits and take my planet down with them."
"Do they have any representatives or leaders up there?" Kani asked.
Nugget nodded. "A loose, very loose, band of captains and 'presidents' formed a council a little while back. There are several of them actually. Think individual nation-states. The refugees up there are divided into their own little factions, with some more powerful than the other. No one wants to try a power-grab because it'll cost them too much and leave them vulnerable to the other factions. I'm hoping your arrival doesn't make any of them do something bantha-headed."

Kani nodded in understanding. "While Jedi Knight Skywalker coordinates with the Yuuzhan Vong Shapers and your terraforming teams, Jun and I can talk with them, see if a Jedi's touch can help resolve any of their disputes."
Nugget snorted. "Be my guest, darling. Can't offer you any protection if you go up there though. You'll have to be aggressive with those numbskulls up there or negotiations are going to be short."
Kani activated her lightsaber and let it spin around in her hand. "I can take care of myself."
The lagomorphic governor shrugged. "Your choice."
"I'll go help Josat set up the med-clinic," Cappricia voiced. "I've read a lot of files about various maladies and how to fix them."
"Well, it looks like you Jedi have a game plan. You have more full support, as worthless as it may be," Nugget pulled out another space-carrot from his suit. "Good luck. I really hope you guys succeed."
[-VI-]
"Target hasn't detected us yet," Ahri murmured, seated on the backs of his legs.
"Look at those fools," Vran grinned, cracking his knuckles at the Damorian s-18 light freighter in their scopes. "Fat and lazy, practically inviting us to slaughter their useless souls."
"We have the pilots in the fighter-escort," Saber Kayala Fei, voiced, hand out-stretched. Next to her was Tyro Aris Zin, seated with a similar look of concentration on his face. "Say the word Saber Khai and their lives are ended."
"We need to wait for them to enter the gravity shadow of that planet," Vestara reminded the others, her voice empty of emotion and face hidden behind her mask. "Once the natural forces deny them hyperspace travel, *then* we strike."
"In three minutes," Sith Saber Kaara voiced in an equally toneless voice.
The Sith Meditation Sphere they were in continued to hover in place in the shadow of a gas giant's moon, the seconds ticking by with agonizing slowness. The anticipation, the bloodshed, the first combat they would see, all stirred the passions of the crew.
"Now," Vestara voiced.
Several things happened in unison.
Kayala and Aris both closed their fists. Lightseconds away the pilots in two of the fighters escorting the large cargo freighter slumped dead in their seats. Before the other pilots realized something was wrong, Kayala and Aris refocused on another pair with similar results. Four of six fighters down without a shot fired. The last two clued onto the fact

that something was wrong when the others—now with their pilots slumped dead over the steering column—veered sharply out of formation. One slammed into the side of the freighter it was supposed to protect, and another collided with one of the other disabled fighters. By then, Kayala and Aris had the last pair of pilots in their mind's eye and closed their fists one last time. The fighters, which had been in the middle of an evasive loop, continued said loop and likewise immolated themselves against the now panicking freighter.

Even before the flames could be extinguished by the vacuum of space, the Meditation Sphere surged forward out of its cover and fired. Its powerful weapons sent out beams of white light at the unsuspecting freighter, lancing out at the aft of the ship, easily penetrating its weakened shields and disintegrating the generators that powered the ship's engines all in the blink of an eye.

"Initial distress call has been issued, now activating comm-jammers," Ahri called out.

"Prepare to board," Vestara commanded, moving to the front of the group standing at the airlock. "Remember, no survivors."

Sith masks dropped into place and sabers were freed. The ship shook slightly as it docked with the side of the larger cargo freighter, the air hissing as it formed a seal with the hapless ship. Ship then overrode the other vessel's computer and forced open their airlock door.

Sensing what was going to happen before it did, Vestara activated her lightsaber and batted away the first few blaster bolts shot at her. A gesture with her hand sent the weapons flying out of the hands of the security personnel and clattering across the floor. She then stepped back, holstering her lightsaber, and let the others surge forward. They did so eagerly, like hounds being released on the trail of bloodied prey. More blaster fire, screams, small explosions, all echoed down the narrow hallways of the ship.

Vestara simply walked sedately behind the others, the metal heels of her knee-high boots clicking against the metal deck plates. She passed several bodies without care, the circular burns in their chests a sign of their quick death. Security personnel, engineers, scientists, her brethren were nondiscriminatory. Above, the lighting flickered on and off as the ship's dying power generators tried to keep the vessel functioning.

"*Bridge is secure Saber Khai*."

Touching her cranial-implanted comlink, Vestara answered. "Very good, Tyro Raas. Get me the cargo manifest for this ship, see if it's worth sending back home. I'll be at the bridge shortly."

"*Understood.*"

Vestara stopped at an intersection in the corridor, a hint of movement down one way caught her attention. "On a second thought Ahri, I have something to take care of first. Get me that manifest anyways."
Letting her lightsaber fly back into her hand, Vestara headed down the path, her senses attuned. Her target wasn't afraid, good. It would have been mildly annoying to corner it and hear the various babblings of a doomed individual. Her footsteps were slow, steady, sounding loudly over the otherwise quiet walkway. Her quarry had disappeared into one of the unlit side rooms.
A snap-hiss of Vestara's purple lightsaber filled the air, its glow eating into the shadows of the room. All around, Vestara saw stacks of cargo crates. She said nothing, using her senses to track her prey. She felt nothing from her target but resignation, however. This caused Vestara to raise an eyebrow behind her mask.
Rounding the last corner in the room, the purple light of her lightsaber fell over a single individual. Clothing torn, a slave collar around her neck, looking no older than herself. Bruised, battered, it was fairly clear what this teenage girl had been on the ship for.
"Just my luck," the girl said with a small bitter grin. In the purple glow, her black eyes seemed to reflect a small amount of madness. "The day I finally gut that bastard of a captain, we get boarded by dark Jedi."
Vestara regarded the teenage girl impassively, not expecting this at all. Despite all her bravado and Sith posturing, she had yet to take the life of a sentient being. Animals, sure, she had put down her fair share of dangerous creatures in her trials. But never a sentient being; the Tribe was not big enough for its Tyros and Sabers to kill each other for practice. Those too weak to make the cut were sent home a disgrace, forced to do menial labor for the rest of their lives.
For some reason, staring at the girl in front of her, Vestara felt none of the thrill or delight that she had sensed from the others on the ship.
"Well?" The girl held out her arms, revealing an almost bony frame. "You going to kill me?"
"You wish to die?" Vestara finally spoke, the Force making her meaning clear.
"No," the girl shook her head. "But I get the feeling begging for my life isn't going to do anything. Never had in the past so I don't see how now's going to be any different."
Vestara held her lightsaber out to the side in a non-threatening manner and took a step closer to the battered teenage girl. "You would be correct."
"Just…one request," fear and despair finally cracking through the teen's exterior.

Vestara took another, silent step forward, her other hand reaching into her combat tunic.
"Make it quick, please," the girl took a step back, her back bumping up against the bulkhead wall. She let out a little sniffle, unshed tears flickering in the light of Vestara's lightsaber. "For once in my useless life, can your great and mighty Force grant me this something?"
Vestara's hand whipped out faster than the eye could see, her glass parang slicing through the air. The girl let out a gurgling gasp, her hands flying up to her severed throat as her life's blood sprayed out over Vestara's covered form.
"The Force cares not for the weak," Vestara said emotionlessly, watching the girl's panicked eyes and feeling her life rapidly leave her body.
A few seconds later, the girl breathed her last, her body limp in a pool of her own blood.
All was silent once more.
Very good.
Ship?
I have a vested interest in you. Such a kill. Her name?
I…I never asked.
Then name her. Name your first kill so you will always remember this moment, so that it will forever be emblazoned on your soul.
Vestara was quiet for a long moment, staring at the crumpled body, emotions conflicted. Finally the Sith Saber took a deep breath. *I shall call her First.*
First?
As you said, Ship. She is my first kill, thus First.
Appropriate.
Aloud, Vestara knelt down next to the body. "And I will never forget you First. If only you had been born stronger, then perhaps the galaxy might have let you live longer."
Her comlink pinged again. "*Saber Khai, a picketship has just entered the system to check on the freighter.*"
Vestara rose and walked away from the body. "Very well. Continue as planned. It will be the first of many warships we will claim for the Tribe."
"*Understood Saber Khai. Are we taking any prisoners this time? These soldiers might have useful information.*"
"Saber Fei, we are Sith," Vestara stepped back out into the corridor, droplets of blood dripping down onto the durasteel deck. "No survivors. If any surrender, drain them of useful information , then throw them out the airlock. We can't afford to care for prisoners, nor can we afford

word of our identities to get out to anyone. Better to eliminate all witnesses. For the Tribe."
"*For the Tribe, Saber Khai. Your will will be done."*
Vestara just nodded, reaching up to remove her mask. Her eyes felt annoyingly irritated, wet, so she reached up with the sleeve of her combat robes and rubbed at them. She felt a sudden surge of anger, anger at First's weakness, at becoming the first to fall to her blade, and channeled that rage into her movements. She exhaled sharply and placed her mask back into position. It was as she had said, they were Sith, and they had a job to do.
[-VII-]
Formos could never have been called a tourist's dream location at any point in time. Barren, rocky, and in the hind-end of space, the only thing it had to offer was a spaceport full of the type of scum and villainy that normally occupied Outer Rim, out-of-the-way systems. Even though the Starhoppers of Aduba had 'tamed' the area and set up a functional government to keep the system secure, Formos was still a place only for the desperate or those allergic to abiding laws went.
"These are, in your language, Life-Seeders," Domain Paasar's Master Shaper introduced to the Jedi and to Nugget. "They are like fountains, sending into the air a geyser of elements conductive to life to gradually shape the planet to a desired state. For maximum effectiveness and expediency, we will set up a full network of sixty-four seeders around this planet. "
"And how long will this take?" Nugget asked, chewing on an ever present space-carrot.
"Two months before noticeable results are seen around the seeders, another galactic year for the process to finish. Once the Life-Seeders begin the process of shaping the planet, it is largely automated. So long as the seeders are undisturbed, the process will continue until completion."
"A couple of months, eh?" Nugget grimaced. "Given how I don't want you Vong and Jedi hanging about here when you can fix up other planets, that just means I have to assign some security forces here just in case some bonehead up in orbit gets the wrong idea."
"Can you spare the people?"
"Ehhh…Not really, but if I want this planet fixed up, it should be worth the aggravation. By the way, not to shoot a gift Gungan in the tongue, but if restoring planets is so easy, why haven't the Galactic Alliance restored more worlds?"
The Shaper inclined his head. "The one-hundred and ninety-two Life-Seeders we have with us are approximately four-fifths of all mature

Life-Seeders in existence. They were developed several years after the war's end, and take five years to reach maturity. A set of sixty-four can only restore two mid-sized planets with atmospheric shells before they are exhausted. Added to that, most worlds prefer the Tenandro Industries' mechanical means of restoring their world. Instead of an organic process, they would rather use their credits on the various industries that are vying for their favor."
"The Galactic Alliance wants to show that we mean business when it comes to helping our friends and allies," Ben Skywalker added. Ben Skywalker heard his comlink chirp and answered it. "Go ahead Kani."
"*Good news and bad news Fearless Leader.*"
"Go ahead." But even as Ben spoke he saw a beat-up looking transport fly over their location. The intent of those onboard was loud and clear in the Force. "Although I think I just figured out the bad news. More warning would be appreciated next time."
"*Just learned about it,*" Kani said. "*The guys in that transport all lost their planets to Vong-shaping. When they heard that a team of Shapers was about to alter Formos, they kind of freaked out.*"
"How many?"
"*The captains in this faction are giving me different tallies of who's no longer up here. A dozen to two-dozen at least.*"
"You do realize we only have five militiamen, me, the governor, and the Shapers down here?"
"*You're the Fearless Leader. While you deal with them, I'm trying to convince the rest of the fleets up here not to orbitally bombard your location. Governor Nugget wasn't lying when he said that they provisionally controlled everyone up here.*"
"Oh, well in that case. Thanks, good luck."
"*Thanks*."
"Wait, what about the good news?"
"*I just told you it. I'm convincing the rest of the people not to shoot at you from orbit and to give the planet-shaping a chance. Trying to anyways. Even if I'm a Jedi, most of these captains are fifty years or older, so I'm still a little girl to them.*"
"Good luck on that front. The transport just landed, so I'll call you back in a little bit."
The transport, a battered freighter that had definitely seen better days, kicked up a small cloud of dust as its thrusters slowly brought it to the arid ground.
"Easy," Ben muttered to the few militia soldiers at his side. They had all reached for their blasters and had been aiming it at the transport's landing ramp. "Guns down. We don't want any accidents. Shapers, you

can get back inside our transport or wait out here, I don't think it'll matter much."
"Your show, Jedi," Nugget shrugged, nodding to his men. "But if things go down the rabbit-hole, all bets are off. I'm not going to sacrifice my men for your Jedi codes."
"Code, governor, we only have one code," Ben said, eyes focused as the passengers of the transport began to pile out. Five, ten, twenty... "That bucket of bolts can hold a lot."
"Keep counting Jedi," Nugget said, coolly pulling out his blasters.
Ben stepped forward, holding his hands out to his side in a non-threatening gesture. "Hiya! Nice day we're having, isn't it?"
The appointed leader of the mob of forty or so individuals—Ben made a mental note to ask Kani where she learned to count—stepped out to meet Ben half way. The man had the air of a soldier, shaven head and muscles that were well defined against the skin-tight shirt he was wearing. He was also wielding a heavy rifle, pointed directly at Ben.
"Turn the scarheads over to us, that's not negotiable, Jedi."
"They're going to help fix up this system."
"Kid, you're too young to remember, but those scarheads back there, their entire species, they've done enough to this galaxy already. These here people, and our families in orbit, have a nice cozy living right now and don't need no Vong biots making a mess of things again."
"And what happens when the food runs out, or if the supply convoys stop coming?" Ben replied evenly. "You've obviously seen war, know how to survive. Tell me, are you actually living up there in orbit or just surviving?"
The man took aim with his rifle, but Ben side-stepped keeping himself between the ex-soldier and the Yuuzhan Vong. "Boy, I'm not going to tell you again. Those scarheads need roasting. After all the pain they caused the galaxy, it's the least they deserve."
"Killing them won't bring back your friends, family, and whoever else that died," Ben continued patiently, a trait he had picked up from his father. He had also seen first-hand, however, that the patient-Jedi voice and posture sometimes infuriated people more than helped. So he tailored his next statement carefully, stepping aside and gesturing at the Yuuzhan Vong. "And right now they're the only ones that have a chance of making this planet farm-able. Of providing a permanent and sustainable home on the surface of the planet. So if you want to speak for the billions of others who live in orbit by all means, open fire. But if you just stop and think, you'll realize that these 'Vong,' these scarheads, are actually here by choice. Here because they want to

make this galaxy a better place. Want to heal it, not cause more pain. Want to restore what was broken and not leave things in ruin."
"Jedi sorcery!" One of the others in the back growled, hefting his own blaster. Even from the distance he was standing, Ben could smell just how intoxicated the man was. "Shut up already. Either get out of the way or die with the scarheads!"
Ben made a brief gesture just as the man's hand squeezed the trigger. Before a second shot could be fired, Ben waved his hand, and the man's gun flew from his intoxicated grip. The others all raised their weapons, looking twitchy, the sound of nearly three-dozen blasters charging not exactly a friendly one.
"Guys," Ben said evenly, his blue eyes meeting each of their confused and hurting gazes and projecting warmth and understanding. The fact that almost all of them were a hairsbreadth away from firing made him determined to get his point across. "This isn't going to solve anything in the long run. Let the Vong do their work, give them that chance. Not because a Jedi is telling you to, but because you guys truly have nothing else to lose. At worse, a planet you aren't even living on is ruined. At best, they create a place where billions can live and grow."
The mob shifted, some glancing uneasily at their blasters or the Yuuzhan Vong shapers. Another intoxicated individual let his drink do this thinking for him, however.
"'nough of this!" Vibroblade in shaking hands, he charged Ben with an angry yell. The man, several dozen kilos heavier than Ben, didn't seem to care that he was attacking a Jedi.
Rather than dodge or Force shove the man onto his back, Ben made a choice—mentally grimacing as he did. The lessons he had learned from his father and at the Ossus Praxeum becoming clearer in that split second. Sometimes being a Jedi sucked royally. He called on the Force to keep him in place as the ruby-faced, rampaging, raging refugee rapidly ran raggedly and remorselessly right at him.
Like a swerving speeder slamming soundly into a solid steel wall, the momentum of the refugee was halted in a brief collision. There was the unmistakable noise of vibroblade piercing flesh, as well as the startled gasps that came out from pretty much everyone present. Even the ones who had come for bloodshed were completely shocked at what they had just seen.
"Feel better?" Ben said in as calm a voice as he could muster, his jaw clenched as he used the Force to keep the pain at bay. Even then, having a vibroblade entering one's shoulder and emerging out the back wasn't the most pleasant of feelings. There was a ton of muscle

and tendons and nerve endings, and none of them liked being perforated.
Ben's attacker, as inebriated as he was, realized what he had just done. Blearily looking up at Ben, he frowned. "Why didn't you stop me?"
"Would that have accomplished anything?" Ben replied, patting the man on his back and using the Force to siphon off some of the man's emotional anguish. "You would be the second in your group to attack. One of your buddies in the crowd might feel that me as Jedi was trying to force my beliefs on you people. I'm not. Just asking you, begging you for a chance. A chance to help these Yuuzhan Vong make things right. You wanted blood for blood? Now mine's has been spilled. Can we get on to healing now?"
The drunken refugee staggered backwards several steps, looking at Ben incredulously and at Ben's blood covering his hands. "You, Jedi, are either ridiculously stupid or idiotically brave."
"Thanks," Ben said with a faint smile. He kept the smile on his face even as Kani's mental assault at his stupidity echoed through his bond with her. Most people would grimace at being verbally reamed out by one's best friend. He got the added benefit of knowing *exactly* what she was feeling as well. Suffice to say, exasperated and annoyed topped the list after she got over her initial shock and fear.
The leader of the bereaved refugees stepped forward again, his military background showing in the way he kept the mob of others from any more acts borne from their emotional anguish. "How long will this planet-fixing take?"
"Master Shaper?" Ben looked to the Yuuzhan Vong.
"Depending on the resources available to us, and if we are allowed to shape without disruption, one galactic month to two to make the ground in the immediate area of the Life-Seeders arable. Using shaping techniques, the first harvestable crops would then be available the following month and a half. To fully make the planet arable another half a galactic year is needed, and another half year to complete the shaping of the planet."
"Several months?" The refugee leader raised an eyebrow. He looked back to those with him, all uncomfortable with anything Yuuzhan Vong.
"They'll need your help," Ben said softly, sensing that they were all on the fence. "Help them make this a planet you can move your friends and family to. A planet to call your own. No more wandering, reprocessed food, recycled air."

The leader swallowed, and very slowly lowered his gun. "Fine. A half year, five months. But if we can't eat fresh food from this planet then, we'll blast the scar-heads regardless."
"Thank you," Ben said solemnly.
The refugees climbed back aboard their transport, and it blasted jets back off to the armada of ships around the planet.
"Think you can stick to your time-line, Master Shaper?" Ben said, holding a hand to his bleeding wound.
"You defended us, spilled blood for us?"
"Master Shaper. I'm a Jedi. For some reason we Jedi have a very hard time keeping our blood and vital fluids in our bodies. I'm just following tradition."
"Like a true warrior," one of the other Shapers—former warrior of Domain Paasar harrumphed approvingly.
"Good, can you tell that to Kani when she gets here. Tell her I was acting manly and like a true warrior."
Nugget, who stepped back closer to Ben after the refugees left, chuckled. "For some reason, boy. I don't think that'll give you much protection."
Ben's face fell. "True. So why did I get stabbed again then?"
"The Force told you?" offered another shaper.
Ben just sighed. "Start shaping the planet. This is just one of many we need to get to."
"Understood, Ben," the Master Shaper acknowledged. "Perhaps you should get that wound tended to in the interim."
"I do that and Chatterbox will be spilling his guts to Kani in several lightseconds."
"She would disembowel him for aiding you?" A shaper asked in surprise.
"Not that type of gut spilling," Ben breathed with a laugh.
He closed his eyes and called on the Force to help begin the healing process. Despite the challenge, he felt calm and energetic at the same time. Like the galaxy was going to keep throwing him for a loop and daring him to find a way out of it. This was his first real mission as leader. Regardless of what the Force threw at him, he was ready for it. He was, after all, a Jedi Knight, and he had a job to do.
[-Chapter End-]

Chapter 2
[-I-]
For Vestara Khai, Saber of the Lost Tribe, life was such a straight forward thing. Kill or be killed, survive where the weaker perish.

Growing up, she had instilled in her what it meant to be Sith. Truly a Sith. She had seen the history datacrons, how the Jedi had tried to portray her people as evil incarnate. As if the dark side of the Force was something that only those corrupted and hopelessly lost turned to as a last resort. But she knew that the dark side was far more than that.

It was a tool, a means to an end. Again it all boiled back down to life, to survival. Had the *Omen* been a Jedi vessel, the Jedi would have tried to peacefully co-exist with the Keshiri, let the natives rule and dictate terms. But it had been a Sith vessel. The Sith had seized control, ensuring that their past, their ways, their identity survived. Because of the act of strength by their ancestors, that identity remained even three millennia later.

In her point of view, the Sith were not evil. Was not a 'side' one chose. But it was a way of life, a constant battle of darkness against stagnation and decay. Sith Tyros and Sabers were sometimes successful in deposing their masters because that was the way of life, old passing on to make way for the new. Rather than have a set way of thinking rule their way of living for generations, new blood was constantly seen in the Council of Lords. All of that would not have been possible had the first Sith bowed down to the natives.

To be Sith was not about wanton murder, about displaying your power, about chaos. To be Sith, to Vestara, meant not waiting for life to change for you, but to make that change yourself. It meant having the strength to do the good and the bad so that the life you lived was one to your pleasing. The light side, the Jedi Code, they were for the weak to excuse their inaction, for the cowardly to explain why so much suffering existed even when the Order did their best to 'right' all the 'wrongs' for the helpless, to hide the fact that peace didn't really exist.

She was Sith. Fueled by her passions, strengthened by the anger she felt from the weakness she saw all around her. Looking through the local HoloNet reports, Vestara was disgusted that the galaxy had become so weak, so fragmented. And it was the Jedi who allowed it to happen. Had the Sith ruled, there would be no appeasement, no pandering to the corrupt and greedy. There would be order, a galaxy held together by strength and uniformity.

All these thoughts passed through the teenage Sith's mind as she gazed through the eye-holes of her war-mask at the figures kneeling before her. They were the surviving crew of the security vessel her strike-team had successfully subdued. Their red-cloth uniforms were stained with perspiration, and the abject terror coming from them only served to intensify her anger.

"Your orders, Saber Khai?" Fellow Saber Vran said gruffly, his muscular form hulking behind their captives.
"I made it clear we weren't to take prisoners," Vestara said evenly. "Why have you brought this trash before me?"
Vran cuffed the captain of the ship. "Tell her."
"Th…the…the Jedi will stop you." The captain stammered, terrified. "Jedi?"
"A team of fully trained Jedi Knights have just arrived in the sector," the captain swallowed. "They're led by Ben Skywalker himself. They'll stop you."
"Who is this Ben Skywalker?" Vestara asked emotionlessly.
"The son of the Grandmaster of the Order," the captain answered, too terrified to be incredulous. "His power is said to be unmatched by any and he will have surely brought the best his Order has with him."
Vestara felt spikes of doubt arise from the members of her team that they hadn't been completely able to hide. Annoyed, she activated her lightsaber and let its purple length hum directly under the captain's chin. "Is that so?"
Eyes wide in panic, he froze in place. A bead of sweat dripped off his chin and hissed on the violet saber. "You won't get away with this."
"Tell me, captain." Vestara murmured, well aware that the rest of her team was watching her. "Do you wish to die?"
The captain very slowly shook his head.
"Then you will make a call to your government. Ask for reinforcements."
"What?"
"Say you've got the pirates who've raided the supply convoy on the run, but need reinforcements to continue the pursuit," Vestara said coolly. "You see, captain. My people and I need ships. Your hopelessly inept squad only gave us trio of light attack vessels and some fighters. We want something more…substantial."
Understanding dawned, and the captain swallowed once more. "You're asking me to betray the other units of the Aduba Starhopper Security-Home Lancer Echelons."
"If that is what you call yourselves, yes," Vestara said evenly. "Now, understand, this is not a request. I can easily go into your mind and force you to make that call."
"You'll let us go after?" The captain gestured to himself and the others.
"If it helps your nerves, by all means, think that," Vestara said, feeling resigned terror spread among the survivors at her comment. "But you understand that we can't afford witnesses running off to tell a Jedi strike force where we are."

"We won't say a word," the captain and his underlings nodded vigorously.
"If only I believed that, captain. But your mind is weak. *You* are weak. You had sixty people under your command. Three ships and twelve fighters. You lost to a single ship and a dozen people half your age. How you lived so long is beyond me. And your weakness got them all killed, has gotten you killed. The only question is, will you die proving to be of some use, or die completely useless to me, your government, and the men and women who trusted you with their lives?"
The objection was barely out of the captain's mouth before Vestara's saber hummed, advancing another centimeter so that the hairs on the main's chin were singed off. "Think hard captain. Rejection will mean that I will kill each and every one of your surviving crew in front of you. Make their deaths long and slow. Agreeing to help me, and I will kill you first. Don't get me wrong, we can entice another Home Lancer Echelon unit here without you. But your help will be great appreciated."
Vestara very calmly used the Force to bend the man's will to her own. The captain managed a weak. 'I'll help,' and Vestara deactivated her saber. "Glad to see you're being reasonable."
The call was made, and more reinforcements were promised in several hours. The moment the call was over, Vestara swept her purple blade through the air, and the captain fell to the ground, headless.
"The others?" Vran repeated, cracking his knuckles behind the six others.
Vestara, sensing her compatriot's darker lusts, answered by hurling her lightsaber through the air. It sliced through the remaining survivors, passing Vran's face with millimeters to spare.
The saber flew back into Vestara's outstretched hand. "Next time, Vran, don't make me clean up your mess. I said no survivors and I meant it."
"He had intelligence on the Jedi."
"And now our awareness will make it more than likely that they can detect us. If this Skywalker is as strong as the captain thought, then merely thinking of him will betray our location. We already know the Jedi are active in this galaxy thanks to Ship. All you did was waste my time and put us at greater risk."
"I did it for the Tribe."
"No, you did it for yourself," Vestara walked up to the muscle-bound Sith. "Why else did you have all the others present on the bridge?"
"Your orders, Saber Khai," Vran sneered behind his mask, not answering.

"Throw yourself out the nearest airlock," Vestara answered snidely. "Short of that, don't let me see you again until the Aduba Starhopper Security vessels get here."
Vran tilted his head mockingly and then left the bridge.
"Tyro Raas," Vestara said, calling on her sparring partner.
"Saber Khai?" the masked figure of Ahri Raas bent down before her.
"Keep an eye on that blockhead. He jeopardizes this mission, kill him."
"It'll be my pleasure," Ahri chuckled, moving on after the muscle-bound dark Jedi.
"What of the rest of us?" Tyro Aris Zin asked.
"Prepare for more Aduba reinforcements. Once we entrap this next group, I will be selecting some of you to return to the Tribe with our spoils."
"And what of the Jedi?" Vran's sister, Kaara, spoke. Showing none of the loyalty a sibling might usually have towards one and other.
"Skywalker will fall to us and we will strike the Tribe's first blow against the Jedi Order," Vestara had steel in her voice as she stepped over the bodies of the ship's crew to address the others. "But we will only attack when we are well and ready. If it is true he has a team of elite Jedi with him, it will be suicide to engage him before that. For now, we will do as all Sith do, bide our time and build our strength. Let the Jedi wear themselves out trying to fix up this leaking dam of a sector. We'll just keep poking more holes as the situation warrants it."
[-II-]
"How's it going, Chatterbox?" Ben clapped Josat's shoulder as he entered the medical center he and Jun and Cappricia had set up. Wiping his sweat-soaked headband, the red-haired healer grinned tiredly. "Going on my twenty-third hour with no sleep. Just great!"
"Now I see why my cousin wanted me to take you," Ben said dryly. "You're just crazy enough to fit in. Why don't you get some sleep?"
"Are you kidding?" Josat said, flapping his arms like some kind of bird. "We have in orbit the equivalent population of a mid-sized industrial planet. And all most of those billions of people have had by way of med-care for the past couple years are aging med-droids and dwindling supplies. Did you know that more than half of the people up there haven't seen a bacta tank in ages? Half the newborns up there don't even have the latest vaccinations. This is like the very definition of what we Jedi have to do, what Master Tekli has been training me to do!"
"She's been training you to run yourself into the ground?" Ben raised an eyebrow.

"Well, no, not really," Josat admitted. "But look at this patient list. I have tens of thousands of kids younger than me with a variety of maladies that could have been cured if we had access to the meds. Some are nearing organ failure because the refugee families can't get proper medical care."
"Where's Fishsticks?" Ben looked through the busy tent. It was massive in size, one of several dozen that had arisen, spread out next to the spaceport in the few days they had been on the planet. It was obvious both Josat and Cappricia had been working overtime and had somehow managed to get every medical expert in orbit into one area.
Almost sheepishly, Josat answered. "I told her to go to sleep. She's smart as heck but doesn't have much practical experience. I've been getting by on adrenals and power naps."
Ben just chuckled. "Alright, a few more hours then, Josat. But if I get a call from Cassa lecturing me on my inability to take care of my squad, it's your fault."
"Yes, Fearless Leader, sir!" Josat mock saluted. "So, did you need something, or did you just come to check on Fishsticks and me?"
"Talking with Governor Nuget, I've learned that one of the larger alliance of factions had its leaders down here. Given that they control nearly a billion people, I wanted to check in with them. I think they're called the 'Sunfire Federation'."
At that, Josat's face soured. "Oh, those guys."
"Josat?"
"What? I'm supposed to be the impartial Jedi, helping everyone in need no matter what, right?"
"Okay, and if you weren't an impartial Jedi?"
Josat scratched the back of his head, quickly glancing around to ensure that no one was listening in. "You heard me say that some of the people up in orbit haven't even seen a bacta tank in months, right?"
"I did."
"A couple years back, when it became clear to the refugees that their stay in orbit might be more permanent, many of the former ministers, governors, and 'leaders' began hoarding supplies. 'Only the best for the leadership because they need to stay in tip-top shape to take care of everyone else'. When those supplies began to run out, they began charging crazy prices for the regular goods. And when we opened the clinic down here, they were the first in line for a check-up. Cappricia and I had to practically call Kani and Jun to get permission for the more needy to get aid. Even then, the 'leaders' wouldn't leave." By the time Josat was done speaking, he was huffing and puffing and glaring daggers at a medical tent separate from everything else. "You can find

all the faction's leaders there. Wouldn't have treated them, but they threatened to withhold aid to the billions they 'care' for if they didn't receive first-class medical care."
Ben clapped Josat on the shoulder again. "Thanks. I'll go see them now." He took several steps towards the 'special' tent and then froze in thought. "Hey, Chatterbox, real quick question. When you and my cousin talk, how do either of you keep track of everything the other says, much less breathe?"
Josat blinked, then grinned. "Innate habit of the talkative I guess. We don't seem to have any problems. Why?"
"Never mind," Ben chuckled. "Carry on."
Continuing to the tent, he stepped in and found himself in a small antechamber. The lights flickered, and Ben felt a disinfectant energy field wash over him. When that was done, the path forward was lit up with a green light and he pushed his way into the next chamber. As he did, he could hear all manner of conversation with his Force-assisted hearing.
"*So how much do you think we should charge for the privilege of coming down here? Productivity decreases if we let too much of our workforce off.*"
"*I know, they've lasted several years without a hospital. No sense needing one now."*
"I don't see why we have to share our planet's medical supplies just because the Jedi said we have to. It's not our fault the other systems didn't stockpile enough."
"We'll remember that the next time your fleet starts running low on food goods."
Ben mentally shook his head. These were the people he had to work with? No wonder his dad always looked so tired after a bout of political sparring. Trying to remember that his main goal was to help and not antagonize—though he desperately wanted to introduce these self-absorbed 'leaders' to an airlock—Ben brushed aside the final flap and entered.
He took in the sight with raised eyebrow. It was as if he had entered a wellness-spa in some high-end luxury resort. The linens of the med-bay beds were pressed, with a thread-count as high as its price. Serving droids bustled back and forth offering drinks, snacks, and holovids. The 'leaders' of the different planets were all chatting amiably, their hospital gowns looking more like silken bathrobes. The space being used to cater to the dozen or so individuals in the room was the same amount being used to treat nearly sixty individuals in the tents next door.

Seeing this, Ben's initial plan to play nice went out the window.
"Hi, I'm Jedi Knight Ben Skywalker," Ben said with a forced grin.
"Oh, good, boy. Fetch me that med-kit over there. I think the last painkillers wore off, my migraine is returning." A leader with a graying goatee and salt-and-pepper hair tied back in a pony-tail ordered.
Ben blinked very slowly, his smile becoming even harder to maintain.
"Of course…president? Minister? You'll forgive me I'm a bit too young to know how to address you."
"Rale Halfer, First Executive Adjunct of the Dennogra system," the man said.
"Dennogra?" Ben handed the man the med-kit. "Isn't that Hutt controlled?"
"Was. When the Vong War knocked them out of the running, the CSA seized control," the man said airily.
"If you're CSA, how come you're not on one of their planets then?"
Rale shifted uncomfortably. "Well, I never said *I* was CSA. The chap they put in charge just didn't have what it took. The cabinet made me F.E.A."
"Uh huh," Ben said agreeably. The man's thoughts weren't exactly well shielded. Rale had simply had the backing of the security forces and 'convinced' the cabinet to put him in charge.
"So, what can we do for you, Jedi Skywalker?" Another leader said lightly.
"Actually, I just stopped by to let you all know that I'm leading a team to restore some of the many planets devastated by the Yuuzhan Vong War."
"Are you, now?"
Ben could see he had their attention, even if some of them were feigning disinterest. "Yup. And I wanted to meet the cunning and resourceful leaders who've managed to take care of their people despite the odds."
"So you'll be restoring all the planets in this sector then?"
"Only have the resources for a handful," Ben shook his head. He glanced at each of them, then made his choice. "You see, I can't justify restoring a world if there is no clear governmental system in place ready to take over. The people also can't be too impoverished or ill, because then they wouldn't be able to maintain said planet. Most importantly, the leaders of the planets I'm restoring have to have the majority support of their people. If the people don't trust or like the leader, I can't very well let a newly restored planet become a war-ground now, can I? I mean that'd just be irresponsible of me."

"You're putting conditions on the planets you're restoring?" One of the leaders said with a small frown.
"Of course," Ben replied with a friendly tone. "They'd have to be fairly independent for a long while, while the rest of this sector gets itself back on its feet. The last thing we need is more chaos on top of everything. Only leaders who are respected, not feared by their people, will have what it takes to get things done."
Eyes darted left and right, the planetary leaders—all survivors in their own right—were already making plans.
"You guys do know I can read your minds, right?" Ben called them out.
"So you're coming here to mock us is that it?" One leader blustered angrily.
"Mock? No, no way," Ben answered. "Just to let you know that all things come to an end. Once your people realize that your actions are jeopardizing a chance at getting a world to settle on, what do you think is going to happen?"
"You haven't been out here, boy," growled Rale. "Out here trying to keep thousands of people alive on bread and water for almost ten years now!"
"Your ships are in quadrant J-Seven-Dorn, right?" Ben addressed the first Executive Adjunct. "From the reports my fellow Jedi have received, sixty-percent are malnourished. Twenty-percent are nearing that state. Five-percent, *five* are overweight somehow."
"Supplies have to be rationed so that those with the abilities can keep the others alive."
"Clearly, the rations have been going to the wrong people," Ben said before he could stop himself. "Listen up, presidents, Adjuncts, and whatever titles you have before your names. The Jedi Order is here to help give your people planets back. Help them get back on their feet. You can either help or get out of the way. If you try to stop us, well, we have several billion people in orbit who will probably have something to say about that. You might wield power now with your security forces, secret police, and controls to the airlocks that shelter the lives of a billion or so people. But stripped of that, what are you? Bullies, thugs, and selfish technocrats who'd sooner make a dishonest credit than care for the people you supposedly lead. Help me, and you'll be known as the one with the foresight to restore your peoples' homeworld. Try to cling to the power you have now, and, well, I don't have to recite my family's history at deposing despots and corrupt politicians do I?"

The leaders all stared at Ben in a mixture of rage and disbelief. It had been a very long time since anyone had told them off, much less threatened them in a way that made them truly feel scared.
"Now, I know there are other planetary leaders still in orbit. Ones who passed on the opportunity so their own people can get aid first. I'll give you until tomorrow morning to come up with a list of reasons as to why *your* world should be restored over theirs. And just an advanced warning, those reasons better be good. Now, have a good day."
[-III-]
"You Jedi aren't really making my job easier, you know."
Ben looked over his shoulder as a visibly annoyed Governor Nugget entered the room. "Sorry?"
"I just got off the comm with the Elite Rays of the Sunfire Federation."
"The who?"
"The rich bantha turds you angered an hour ago," Nugget supplied grumpily. "They want me to expel your sorry Jedi rear and the Vong you brought with you. Otherwise they'll withhold supplies until you leave the system. Given that they control two of the main food-ships, give me a reason why I shouldn't."
Ben put down the datapad he had been reading and sighed. "Is there a way to communicate to every ship in orbit?"
"We built a relay a couple years ago to warn them about a meteor shower," Nugget said.
"And will it broadcast just to the comm-systems or across the intercoms as well?"
Nugget blinked slowly, catching on to what the young Jedi's plan was. "You really don't have a diplomatic bone in your body. You tell all the crews and passengers why you're here and you'll have riots. Some of the ships will tear themselves apart."
"The alternative is continuing to humor this council while they starve, abuse, and exploit the people in their ships," Ben said coolly. "Not all the ships are going to go up in flames. When the flames cool we can have the more moderate and respected captains take over."
"You're going to get people killed," Nugget said. "And from what I know, deliberately inducing deaths for personal gain ain't the Jedi way."
"It's not personal gain."
"Isn't it?" Nugget pulled out a space carrot. "Way I see it, with the Elite Rays gone, you'd benefit from the lack of opposition. If I wanted them gone I could have gone up there and arrested them, or used my planetary cannons to blow them out of orbit."

"I have two friends in orbit," Ben said evenly. "Should I continue to risk their lives and safety to a bunch of power-hungry slobs who couldn't care less about morality?"
"And to save their lives, you get a dozen people killed? Two dozen? What's the going price on a Jedi's life these days?"
"It's not just them," Ben replied. "The greed and abuse of power will delay aid to the billion people they watch over. That's almost one-tenth of the population in orbit! They're leaders, but instead of caring, they're exploiting their people."
"So what? You remove them from power and everything magically gets better?" Nugget said lazily. "Jedi Skywalker, I don't know what part of the galaxy you're from, but that sort of haphazard planning is only going to cause more suffering in the long run."
"What?"
"There's a reason why Sunfire has maintained control of their unruly and poor masses for nearly a decade," Nugget gestured with his carrot. "Sure they might not have ascended to their position in the democratically elected niceness you folks at the Core can afford, but they're still the leaders. *Strong* leaders."
"Dictators," Ben argued.
"Still strong leaders," Nugget shook his head. "No matter what you call them. They've held their people together, kept order on those ships. They might have hoarded a few supplies every now and then, ruthlessly taken out rivals, but tell me. Would those people have survived all these years if Sunfire *wasn't* in charge?"
"What are you saying? That I should just leave those corrupt despots in place?"
Nugget shrugged. "Above my pay-grade. I'm only saying this because any trouble up there ripples across the entire ring of ships, and then becomes *my* trouble. Simple social-economic stuff that anyone with an iota of experience should know. An outside force removes the Federation by force and you create a giant vacuum in power. Then, it'll become an all out fight to gobble up that power. You have your crazy religious lunatics who will try to convert everyone in orbit. The dictator-wanna-bes who'll try to marshal their friends and take over individual vessels to form independent nations. Those who think they can form a government to the pleasing of their Jedi–saviors, by the way they'll probably be killed first. And a myriad of other groups trying to have their voices heard. Those with the biggest guns, the most numbers, and the loudest, will then take control, and you'll be back to where you began. Instead of one dictator though, you'll have a dozen or so of

them running around in their ships killing or imprisoning everyone who doesn't agree with them."
Ben frowned. "But if I leave them in control, the reconstruction efforts will be delayed for months, years even. You've seen the reports, Governor Nugget. During the Cal Omas era, the delays and cost overruns were caused by corruption and misuse of materials. If they're gone, then the reconstruction efforts can be done so much easier and earlier."
"My advice, boy?" Nugget said airily, throwing the leafy part of his carrot into a nearby rubbish bin. "Apologize to the idiots in orbit. Like it or not, ya have to work with them. Once you give them a planet to live on, and there's an actual government in place, maybe then ya can tell the people that their leaders are power-grubbing morons. Like they won't know anyways. Until then, suck it up. Make deals, bribe them, appeal to their sense of plutocracy."
"How do you know so much about government building?" Ben asked.
"Jedi Skywalker," Nugget rolled his eyes. "The Aduba Starhoppers were far from a legitimate organization all those years ago. When the Hutts fell, however, they left a power vacuum that we exploited. We were hardly elected. You could say we were the one with the biggest guns and shouted the loudest. It took us a better part of these ten years to finally cement our control over this sector and nearby systems."
Ben swallowed slowly, digesting the information. "It turned out well in the long-run though. Right?"
"Right, like me being stuck on this desert of a planet with several billion people in orbit, a neophyte Jedi Knight trying to make a mess of things, and increasingly tardy supply ships, is better?" Nugget headed back towards the door. "Not trying to tell ya how to do your job, Jedi Skywalker. Just trying to keep mine from becoming more difficult than it already is. Do what ya want. My way hasn't improved things any better, so I'm open to anything."
The door slid close behind the governor, and Ben groaned. From thinking that his plan of action was a light-side one meant to spare lives and loads of suffering, to second-guessing himself, he had brief doubts as to whether he was cut out to actually be a Jedi Knight. But how could he stomach those obviously despicable leaders and their continuous abuse of their people when that went against everything he had been taught as a Jedi. 'Jedi don't bargain with dictators,' 'Jedi don't bend their morals for those holding the helpless at blaster-point.'
But then Nugget comes along and tells him that the reality of the situation doesn't match the textbook response he had been taught. That doing something in the name of the lightside would create dark

side consequences in the long run. Yet, how was Nugget to know the future? What if, by removing the Sunfire Federation, things really did turn out for the better? Ben would hardly call himself a savant, or seer, but wasn't inaction and apathy to the situation an equal evil? Working with them would create suffering and death in the short-term as vital supplies are siphoned away and a system of corruption was allowed to flourish. Removing the council would cause suffering and death in the long-term as people fought to gain control, siphoning away resources in a needless civil war.

Ben rested his forehead on the desk in front of him, groaning once more. Where was the glamour? The lightsaber swinging, holo-cam speeches, bad-guy roasting, saving-the-galaxy missions that he had grown up salivating on. Make deals with selfish bantha slugs? That was so not the Skywalker style. Heck, there were so many stories in the media about his dad, some true, some 'probable,' and others ridiculous, that if one tallied up the results, there had never been a peaceful situation without a little blaster-fire and revolution.

"Okay, Skywalker, Plan B," Ben exhaled. He ran a hand through his curly red hair. "Now I just have to figure out what Plan B is."

[-IV-]

The body of the captain of the latest security ship secured by the members of the Tribe dropped to the ground, a look of shock on his face.

"Was that more to your liking, *Saber* Khai?" Vran said patronizingly, kicking the body aside with his heavily-booted foot.

"Good dog," Vestara replied without missing a beat. "Now go to your kennel and sit."

Vran's face, hidden behind his mask, twisted into a sneer of hate, but Vestara's fellow Saber left the bridge.

"This is far too easy," Ahri Raas laughed, hand gripping the head of another terrified crew member. "But the terror is exquisite."

"Tyro, quit playing with your prey," Saber Kaara rebuked.

"Oh fine," Ahri's blade shot out the chest of the crewmember, and the Sith Tryo let the body fall where it was. "So, eight ships. All little tug-boats. We're going to be at this for ages at this rate."

"Saber Kaara, choose a couple members from Team Two to take these ships back to the Tribe," Vestara ordered. "The High Lord should be pleased that, tug-boat or not, we have procured ships with which we can begin our return."

"As you command," Kaara bowed her head and left the bridge.

This left Vestara alone with her fellow training partner. "Tyro Raas, come here."

"Ves?"
There was a snap-hiss and Vestara's saber lanced out for a fraction of a second. Ahri staggered backwards, cursing in pain as a fresh burn the width of Vestara's purple saber marred his cheek. "What the hell, Vestara!"
"It's Saber Khai to you, *Tyro*," Vestara said coolly. "Remember your place, who you are."
"What? What did I do?"
"True Sith are not cruel," Vestara hissed, gripping Ahri by the front of his robes with one hand and pointing to the crewmember Ahri had killed. "We kill for our survival, not sport. We kill this crew so they won't spread word, so the Tribe can return unnoticed. *Not* because it is fun, or their terror empowers us. If not we're little more than bullies and thugs with powers."
Ahri swatted her hand away. "And why aren't you telling this to Vran? You know he enjoyed hunting down the peons on this bucket."
"I don't have a shred of respect for that lump of muscles," Vestara snarled, jabbing a finger into Ahri's chest. "But you, Ahri, you know better. If you're going to use Vran as your role-model, then go join the ones Saber Kaara picks out and go back to the Tribe."
"The others are right," Ahri said evenly.
"What?" Vestara's voice contained a hint of warning.
"The killing, you're not cut out for it," Ahri said, removing his mask, but keeping his hood raised.
Vestara coldly activated her saber, the purple glow illuminating the shadows of Ahri's face. "Am I? Tell me, Tyro, why do you think Sith kill then? If not for survival? To further our cause? Then what?"
Ahri reached out and gripped Vestara's blade, the Force shielding his hand from any damage, and pushed it aside. "We kill because it gives us strength. Because their every last breath is a reminder of weakness, of the fact that we survived where they didn't. We kill to prove to the galaxy that we are a force to be reckoned with, so that one day we don't have to scurry about in the shadows. Killing is the core of what a Sith is, *Saber Khai*. Our masters taught us this."
"You're wrong," Vestara's eyes flashed, a surge of Force energy coursing through her saber and nullifying Ahri's protection. The other Sith quickly yanked his hand away, a fresh brand on his palm. "If killing was the core of who we are. If we still believed in peace through power, then the idea of sacrifice would not have been stricken from our practices. The masters of old realized that killing a sacrifice did not strengthen us, but weakened us instead. It's our *passion*s that strengthen us most, not our hatred. 'Peace is a lie, there is only

passion. Through passion I gain *strength*,' Ahri. *Passion*, not hated of the weak. There is no greater foe than one who fights for what they believe in."
"But what fuels that passion, Vestara?" Ahri countered. "Our hatred! Our hatred for our weaknesses, for the way this galaxy has gone to shambles, for our Tribe's inability to escape our planet for millennia! That hatred fuels our passion, makes us strive to be more than who we are, to be better than the previous day. Otherwise we'd be as toothless as the Jedi. Talking about peace and justice, but in reality doing little. Stagnating, weakening, resting on the victories of the past and not forging new ones. *We* are strong because our hatred gives us that passion. To be Sith, the only life that should matter is your own. The only world that should matter is the one you want to create. *That* is what a true Sith should fortify themselves with."
Vestara deactivated her lightsaber, clipping it to her belt. "So you would side with Vran, then?"
"The entire team shares his beliefs, Saber Khai," Ahri said evenly. "If it were not for *Ship* and the High Lord's decree that you were in charge, you would have probably been killed on the bridge of that other picket-ship by a half-dozen different lightsabers. Your way is not the way of the Tribe."
"But it *is* the way of the Sith," Vestara replied coolly. "And that is enough for me."
"You walk a lonely path then."
"And the path you walk, you always have to be looking over your shoulders," Vestara said. "If Ship, the embodiment of the Truth Sith and all that they were, wanted someone who thought like you, it would have spoken to the High Lord. Think about that."
"Am I free to go, Saber Khai?" Ahri said in answer, his voice betraying nothing.
"You are Sith, Ahri. If you think the tribe is better served by my death, then challenge me now."
"The High Council and…"
"Say I was killed by Jedi. That my foolish 'un-Sith' ways were my downfall after all," Vestara cut him off, dismissing his excuse.
"The Ship…"
"If I was not strong enough, if my resolve was all I had, why should it care?"
Ahri's hand rested on his lightsaber for several long seconds. Very slowly, Vestara's hand gripped the hilt of her own. But then Ahri shook his head, letting his hand fall to his side. "I am many things, but

treacherous is not one of them. My saber won't be the one that ends your life, Vestara. Nor will it be the one to deflect the killing blow."
"I expect nothing less." Vestara said coldly. "*Now* you are dismissed, Tyro."
She felt him disappear further into the ship, leaving her alone on the bridge full of corpses. Vestara eyed each body without emotion. She shed no tears for them, cared not for their names or families. To put it simply, they were weak and stupid, had helped to prove once again the superior training of the Tribe. At the same time, however, she couldn't help but have doubts. Was what she believed truly so in conflict with what the Tribe believed that even her long-time rival no longer her saw her as Sith?
Why did you choose me? Vestara thought to the Ship, her gaze focusing out into the void of space. *If so many believe as Ahri does, does that not make <u>me</u> the one unfit to be Sith?*
The answer came with the cold logic that normally accompanied Ship's telepathic messages. *And if they believed the galaxy would end tomorrow, if they thought that the Sith Empire could be reborn as they know it with just their corrupted thinking? You know what you know, Saber Khai. Do you doubt me?*
No, Vestara sent back. *Merely myself.*
The others will sense that doubt, will revel in it and turn it against you.
The others mean nothing, Vestara thought almost derisively. *They are either rabid hounds like Vran or sycophants like Kaara and Ahri. Remember that then, my chosen. You are the leader that will return the Sith to the galaxy. They are trash. Care not for the opinions of trash. If they do not fall in line by choice, make them or dispose of them. You are Sith.*
I serve my Tribe, Vestara corrected. *We are few enough in number as it is. Killing them will serve no purpose other than to weaken us as a whole.*
Maybe I was mistaken then, Ship replied, its thoughts chastising. *The intelligent and strong advance. The dumb and weak perish. So it has always been since the first schism. To attempt to alter that course will only lead to your death.*
I have already been warned about that, Vestara sent back snidely. *Now unless you have anything to add. Anything constructive...*
Why did you accept my calling?
What?
You did not have to consent to my will. But you did. Why?
The Tribe...it needs to be more if it is to make it in the galaxy.
And what of the Sith?

That can come later. There can be no Sith so long as the Tribe believes in antiquated teachings that have marooned us on the planet for centuries. And there can be no Sith if those antiquated teachings make one a Sith, for we would destroy ourselves all over again. The Sith have to be more than they were, more than they are today. We need to be strong enough inside and out to forge an empire that will last millennia. That will finally bring strength and order to this enfeebled galaxy.
You dream big for one who is so small and insignificant.
It is a dream for more than one. A dream I will die making a reality if I have to. Can the others with me say the same for their dreams?
[-V-]
"You know what I want," an exhausted Ben Skywalker reclined in his chair aboard the *Dawn*. "I want a straight forward conversation that will yield results and not more problems."
"Here, here," Kani said dryly, raising her water-flask. "I swear, most of the captains up there are more concerned about losing the power they've held onto for nearly a decade than actually giving their people a planet to live on."
"And most of the people have given up hope of ever setting foot on another planet in their life time. On one of the Ubese ships up there, they actually have an oath that translates into 'by the world I hope to live on some day.'" Jun added sadly, shaking his head. "Even with us Jedi here, the people up there aren't expecting anything more than a temporary break from the life they have."
"Yeah, it's nothing like in the holos," Cappricia said dejectedly. "Did you know that there are thousands of kids up there who've never even set foot on a planet or moon or anything else beside the metal decks of their ships? They've never smelt fresh air, seen an ocean or lake, or even had the chance to feel the sunlight on their faces! And some of the older kids have even forgotten what that was like. We have to do *something*."
"Come on Fearless Leader," a haggard looking Josat chimed. "Pull some solution out of that hat you Solos and Skywalkers keep getting them from."
"My last solution backfired," Ben replied mulishly. "Must have chosen the wrong hat."
"So who cares if a bunch of greedy…"
"And corrupt," Jun added to Kani's statement.
"And powerful," Josat added.
"Don't forget 'mean'," Capprcia finished.

Kani rolled her eyes at the others. "So who cares if a bunch of greedy, corrupt, powerful, and very mean people don't like you anymore."
"The greedy, corrupt, powerful, mean people have control of over a billion lives," Ben answered darkly. "I anger them any further and those suddenly get a whole lot worse. I know we can't please or save everyone, but how is it up to us to decide who has to stay up in orbit and who gets a cozy planet?"
"Hey, we have the supplies to restore, what, six planets?"
"Three at a time, and sustainable for small populations only," Ben reminded. "That means the last three planets will have waited an additional two to three years just for the shaping process to begin. When the people on those ships see that the others are getting planets, what do you think is going to happen?"
"At the same time, if we try to plant more people on a planet, we'll outstrip its ability to support them," Cappricia said, catching on.
"Exactly," Ben exhaled slowly. "My cousin, Jacen, he once told me that if someone is elevated to a higher status, and those around don't believe he or she deserves it, all that elevation will create is envy and resentment. The last thing we want is to start a half-dozen wars among the various factions in orbit. Some people feel they *deserve* a new planet, some desperately need one, and others will be caught between the two. We elevate the wrong group, give them a planet when others think they should have it first, and poof, there goes the stability in this region."
"Why don't we just follow the outline Chief of State Hamner sent with us?" Josat voiced, holding up a datapad. "His team of analysts have already marked off which planets we should restore."
"Yes, but it says nothing about which groups of people should be allowed to settle first. I doubt even the Chief of State knew that there were nearly ten billion refugees in this system alone."
"We can try to contact Aduba Prime." Cappricia said.
"They're expecting *us* to help *them* out," Jun said.
"Should we call the Jedi Order and ask for someone with experience in this stuff?" Josat looked to the others.
"We'd need the Chief of State's approval for that," Kani made a sour face. "And any help is weeks away anyways."
"Okay, back to the Fearless Leader and his wonderful plans," Josat said with brightly.
"So much for teamwork. Go throw yourself out the airlock, Chatterbox," Ben groaned. He then paused and straightened as if a thought had struck him.

"No Ben, we can't throw the greedy, corrupt, powerful, mean guys out the airlock," Kani said.
"*Very* mean," Cappricia corrected.
"Not that," Ben said sending a mock-glare at Kani. "Teamwork. Voting. We have the guys in orbit vote for which factions get the planets, and they can't vote for their own faction."
"How would we make the elections fair though? There are only six of us and a lot of ships."
"Have them come to Formos, to the more stable ships," Ben answered. "Governor Nugget and his people can help out."
"Arranging a vote will take time and credits," Kani said.
"Chief of State Hamner has given me a bucket full of credits, and time is something everyone has little of, so they'll get it done as best they can."
"See!" Josat clapped. "There! Super-Solo-Skywalker-plan-out-of-nowhere in action!"
"Didn't I tell you to throw yourself out the airlock?" Ben grumbled,
"I'll get Nugget to build a list of factions," Cappricia said. "I can then cross-reference them with the information Kani and Fur-ball have gathered while in orbit. We can then split up the planets we're going to restore based on terrain and species of the refugees. I know that some of the species like the planet a little warmer or wetter than others."
"Great," Kani said. "I'll go back to the fleet with Jun and start to spread the word. We'll try to get more precise population counts so we know when a ship is not allowing everyone to vote."
Josat blinked. "And I'll…continue healing people I guess. You guys have fun with the whole election thing."
"Isn't teamwork grand?" Jun chuckled, 'lightly' slapping Josat on his back.
"Yeah, if a giant kitty isn't trying to get you to cough up a Fur-ball," Josat glared, rubbing his back.
"At least you know he has your back," Cappricia giggled at her own joke.
"Okay, enough." Ben sighed. "Everyone, sleep first, then implement Super-Solo-Skywalker-plan-out-of-nowhere later. And hope the Force still likes my family or we're in deep, deep poodoo."
[-VI-]
Together they had created quite a mess.
Head plopping down on the pillow of his bunk, Ben let out a groan of relief. Plan in progress, elections in two-month's time—coincidentally, around the same time the area around the atmospheric seeders on Formos would become arable. In between that, all he and the Yuuzhan

Vong shapers had to do was start fixing up the planets Hamner's people had selected. Selections that wouldn't work thanks to the billions more than predicted in need of a planet. He was barely sixteen and yet the lives of nine-point-eight billion people were now in his hands. If it wasn't for his friends, he knew that the burden would have been way too much for him, even if he was Skywalker.
His door chime rang.
"Come on in, Kani."
The door slid open, and his best friend slid into the room. Taking a seat at the foot of his bed and patting his leg, Kani offered him an equally tired smile. "Hey, how you holding up?"
"Do or do not," Ben quoted, turning his head towards her. "You okay?"
"We're so sheltered at the Praxeum I've forgotten how ugly life can be," Kani said.
Ben scooted over to the side and patted the place he had vacated. Without another word, Kani laid down next to him, her eyes closing for a moment as she drew strength from their bond. Neither were at all awkward. When they had been little, still terrified of using the Force, they had sought comfort in each other whenever one of them had a Force-assisted dream or nightmare. As they grew older, that hadn't changed; their strength always returning in the presence of the other.
"It's places like this that make me want to cut myself off of the Force all over again," Kani murmured, taking comfort in Ben's hand stroking her arm. "The feeling of wrongness, suffering, hate, greed. All the yucky stuff that I felt during the Vong War. It's like it's all trapped up there in those ships. Flying cans of misery."
"Is there anything I can do?" Ben said, continuing to rub her arm and lending her his strength.
"I can take it," Kani shook her head. Reaching over she drew his hand into both of hers and pulled it towards herself. "Just need to recharge."
"Skywalker-recharging service always available," Ben quipped, extending his Force presence so that it drained away the negative emotions she was feelings.
"Knew I kept you around for a reason," Kani bantered back with a sigh. She pulled his Force presence around her like a protective blanket, unconsciously nuzzling him as he held her. In turn, she lent him her own strength trying to draw away anything that was distressing or hurting him. Just as they had always done since they were kids.
They stayed as they were in a comfortable silence, their bond reinforcing and reenergizing the other. The minutes passed slowly, silently, the rest of the world completely tuned out.
"Think I've bitten off more than I can chew?" Ben asked finally.

"I think the galaxy is always doing that," Kani replied, her eyes closed. "But we'll get it done. You, me, Chatterbox, Fishsticks, Fur-ball. We might be young, but we're all Jedi, and that counts for something."
"My cousins set the bar ridiculously high. Heck, so did my dad. He was several years older than me when he blasted apart the first Death Star. Cousin Anakin was actually younger than me when he brought down the Black Sun syndicate."
"Hey, destroying things is easy," Kani replied. She turned into him, her purple eyes holding his gaze. "Putting things back together, fixing the galaxy, now that's a challenge. We do this, and we'll have those cousins of yours beat by lightyears."
"If we do this."
She placed a finger on his lips. "When we do this. The people up there want those planets just as badly as we want to settle them."
Ben exhaled slowly, nodding. "Yeah, it just seems impossible at times. So many hurdles, obstacles we have to navigate. It's like trying to maneuver around an asteroid field blindfolded."
"For a Jedi, that's still an easy thing," Kani poked at his bicep. "We got this, yeah?"
"Yeah," Ben nodded, her gentle expression calming him just as much as his Force presence was soothing her.
The door chimed again. Before Ben could respond, it slid open.
"Hey Ben! Guess wha…" Josat trailed off.
"What, Chatterbox?" Ben said wryly.
"You look comfy, Kani," Josat smirked.
Kani just rolled her eyes. "Very. Go tell the Fearless Leader whatever it is that you found out then leave us alone."
"Right. You'll never believe what just happened."
"I won't ever hear what just happened if you keep saying lines like that," Ben sighed.
"Sorry, yeah. So I was doing an inventory of the medical supplies, *all* of them. Even if we get a planet shaped and ready to live on, the supplies will only last for another few months at most."
"You're out of breath, smiling, and excited for that?"
"No, let me finish! I brought this issue up with Governor Nugget and some of the heads of the other ships. We don't have the meds but we have enough raw materials to start creating the right stuff. We also have a few hundred chemists, biologists, and other science-y folk still stuck on those ships up there. Now a lot of them haven't practiced in a while or didn't have the…"
"The point, Chatterbox!" Ben groaned.

Josat blinked, a little put out. "Fine. They agreed to pool their resources and the first new building on the shaped part of Formos will be a hospital and laboratory. Several ships volunteered to be the raw materials, and with some Vong-buildings, we should be able to have a viable hospital up and running just in time for the planet to be occupied."
"What about the people on the ships being used?" Kani asked.
"Governor Nugget is opening up a part of the spaceport for them to live in in the meantime. But can you believe it! I actually got some of those crazy space-scoundrels up there to do something constructive!"
Ben couldn't help but laugh at Josat's enthusiasm, truly understanding why Cassa had been so determined that he be on the trip. "Great, Josat. I was just talking to Kani about how impossible all this seemed, and here you go turning things around."
The younger Jedi teen blushed slightly. "It was mostly Governor Nugget's work. All I did was point out the dwindling resources and the fact that the supply convoy was now a month later than usual. I'm sure if anyone else…"
"You delivered the happy news, now go away," Kani said wryly.
"Wha…oh, yeah," Josat's eyes darted back and forth on the two in the small bunk. "'Kay, leaving now. I think I need some sleep too. Been a long week and all."
"Bye, Chatterbox," Ben chuckled.
"Right, stepping out now, bye." The door slid shut.
Kani groaned and buried her face into his chest. "Why couldn't it have been Jun or Cappricia, why did it have to be the guy we've called Chatterbox?"
"Hey, we're both clothed, you're on top of the sheets, we weren't doing anything but talking, and they all know we're best friends," Ben rubbed her back. "One of the perks of being a Jedi is that all they have to do is read the situation. Besides, Chatterbox knows when to talk and when not to."
"You hope."
"I really do. Last thing I want to do is beat up my favorite cousin's best friend."
"You couldn't beat up a lizard monkey, Ben," Kani giggled.
"Of course not, what did a lizard monkey ever do to me?"
Kani just sighed and rested herself against him once more. "We're lucky we have such great friends, yeah?"
"Very," Ben hugged her close and closed his eyes. Things were slowly looking up and he only hope they continued that way in the days to come. But he knew for certain that regardless of how bad things got,

he had his friends at his side and they would face whatever came together.

[-VII-]

Alone.

Vestara Khai stood alone in a desolate, charred field. The sky above choked with thick black smoke. A distant city burned, red and orange flames leaping high and consuming everything. There was only a deathly silence, an empty stillness.

The Path of the Sith is not one many can walk.

She turned her head to see a glowing red ball of energy, tendrils flowing out like the rays of a sun.

"You have said this many times, Ship."

And still you do not listen. Why do you persist in trying to elevate this Lost Tribe? They are truly lost, not just to history, but to the Sith Order. They use the name Sith but do not truly understand it like you. Throughout history there have been many like your people. Dark Jedi who called themselves Sith but were in fact merely butchers using the Force to kill and gain power.

The world around Vestara spun and she was taken into space, a floating graveyard of debris and bodies encased a planet like an egg-shell.

The downfall of so many Sith Empires was the belief that the Sith were superior to all, even each other. Infighting, delusions of grandeur, mistrust and betrayal, they were the undoing of us. Not the Jedi, not the Republic or whichever government opposed us. In the end, we were our own worst enemies.

"What would you have me do then? They are still my people. If they are lost, I will help them find their way again. I cannot build an empire by myself."

Then I have chosen poorly. The ball of red energy flashed into existence in front of Vestara. *To be a Sith is to hunger. To hunger for the power to control one's own life. To achieve victory against the chaos the Jedi allow to replicate throughout the galaxy. A Sith is order, control, discipline. Friendships, compassion, they have no place in our lives. Friendships imply that some are more equal to your eyes than others, friendships are a weakness that can be exploited. You, Vestara Khai, are one of the few rare seeds among your people with the potential to grow into something great.*

"Enough," Vestara waved a hand through the air, and the world shimmered, then solidified into the council chambers on Kesh. "I did not ask you to choose me. I know the High Lord sent me out here fully

expecting me to fail. And should I return successful, he would have me killed since my return would challenge his power."
Then make yourself invaluable. Make this mission his undoing and not your own.
"How, with pirated ships twenty years out of date?"
We all must start somewhere. For now, though I advise that you awaken. Your pet dog approaches.
Vestara's eyes snapped open, her purple blade flashing into existence and hissing as it blocked Vran's red. The image faded from her vision in second.
And then her eyes snapped open for real. Trying to control her rapidly beating heart, she slowly rose from her kneeling position.
"What is it?"
Vran was in the doorway, arms folded in front of his chest. "Tyro Aris cracked the encryption on the command ship. We know where the Jedi are."
"What of it?" Vestara answered coldly. "I told you, we cannot act against them until we are ready. To do so would bring unwanted attention unto us. Or do you want the Jedi Order to come here en masse and then track us back to Kesh?"
"No one will track us down if there are no survivors," Vran replied. "We will take the Jedi by surprise and then operate with impunity in this region of space. No more skulking about."
"Tell me, did you even pay any attention to the military strategy lessons your master taught you. Or are you being your naturally thick-headed farmer-stock self?"
Both lightsabers activated at the same time, lighting up the meditation chamber in their red and purple auras.
"Vran, let me make this clear for you. I will kill you myself if you go against me. The Ship has existed since the time of Marka Ragnos, Naga Sadow, Ludo Kressh. Is as pure a Sith artifact as any. It wills us to do what we do so that we may herald in a Sith Empire reborn, so that we may elevate our Tribe. I will not allow your thickheaded, imbecilic actions to jeopardize that."
"Instead of striking at our true enemies, at the Jedi, like we've been born and trained to do, you would have us play pirate. Kill feeble prey and bide our time?"
"We have nothing but time, Vran. Rushing things will be our downfall. I know you know that."
"Saber Khai, if it were not for the backing of this vessel, you would be dead several times over, you know that, right? The Tyros follow my

lead, the other Sabers back me. You are a leader in name only. If I say we strike at the Jedi then that is what we will do."
Vestara very calmly held out her hand, and Vran's hands flew to his throat as he let out a choked sound. In an almost bored tone, Vestara lifted the large man off the ground. "You can do what you wish, Vran. If the others truly believe that your way is the way of the Sith, it is no wonder that the Ship nearly abandoned our planet when it first arrived."
Vestara made a second gesture and Vran was sent flying into the nearby wall. He fell to all fours, gasping for air. She gestured again and lifted him back up, before throwing him into another wall. "You're right that these small ships we've been seizing are pittance. That the supply convoys we've hijacked will do little to help our people. But we all start somewhere, Vran. Today a tugboat, tomorrow a gunboat, then a battle cruiser. Patience is a key trait to a true Sith, as even the High Lord preaches. If you act only for yourself and not for your tribe, then I should kill you right now. Will you obey?"
With a snarl, Vran glared balefully at Vestara but nodded.
"Good dog, get out."
Vran tried to be dignified as he walked out the door, his rage palpable to all the Force sensitives in the system
"That was amusing," Ahri Raas commented mildly, slipping into the room.
"Thanks for the support," Vestara deadpanned. "Would you like me to give your face a matching burn on the other side?"
"Vran wasn't entirely right. The Tyros will follow whoever benefits them the most. Seeing as how you're on the ship that can vaporize all the others with a thought, most side with you."
"Most, not all?"
"What, you want to win the popularity contest? Kayala is better looking, Kaara is smarter, Rashima the better fighter. Try to choose one of those and not go for all three."
"Did you want something?"
"I saw Vran head this way and thought I'd watch."
"So you could be the first to swear loyalty to him if he killed me?"
"You would have been dead, what would you care," Ahri shrugged.
"Nice to know where you stand," Vestara said, not very surprised by his casual tone.
Ahri smirked and headed for the door. With a dismissive wave of his hand, he relayed some more news. "Saber Fei wanted me to tell you that we have apparently picked up the biggest fish of all. Something the computer files call a 'Victory-class' Star Destroyer was just

dispatched from Aduba to investigate the disappearances of the other ships. Apparently the leader of the Home Lance Echelon is onboard."
"How long until they arrive?"
"Two months," Ahri said in the doorway. "Or more. These guys aren't exactly a professional army. The only reason why we know it's coming is because they sent out a general notice to all Home Lance Echelon ships to group up and travel in packs. Something tells me that this Star Destroyer is the biggest ship they have."
"Understood."
"That's it?"
"Tyro."
He ignored the warning in her voice. "Ves, that ship is still seventy days away. Vran is *not* going to just sit around and wait for it to come. Neither are those that back him. Nor will they be content to keep up these raids on the supply convoys. Unless you redirect his hunger, you're going to have to put him down."
"When I have an order to give, I will give it," Vestara said curtly. "The last thing I need is for you to run off to Vran so he can do the exact opposite of what I have planned."
Ahri paused, slowly turning back to Vestara. She ignored the emotions she picked up through their bond as he raised an eyebrow at her. "How highly you think of me."
"Would you prefer I send you on one of our captured ships back to the Tribe?"
"Waiting is a Jedi's activity."
"So is getting killed."
"You're about to meet both criteria. We need a target, a military target. If not the Star Destroyer, then name a system."
Kill him.
Vestara stiffened as she felt Ship's command. *No*.
Kill him or I will get another to do it.
His death serves no purpose.
A lesson, for both you and the others.
"Ves."
Vestara blinked, her eyes widening behind her mask when she realized her lightsaber blade was millimeters from removing her sparring partner's head. She quickly shut the blade off and spun away, stalking to the vessel's oblong viewport. "Leave, Tyro. Tell the others to acquaint themselves with the ship designs of this 'Star Destroyer'. It is likely to have many more people, many more soldiers, than the tenders we've been hijacking. There can be no room for error."

"Yes, Saber Khai," Ahri said coolly. He then left the room, the door sliding shut behind him.
You let him live.
So I did. Vestara focused hard on the view outside the ship. She remembered the spike of genuine fear from Ahri when her muscles had been a twitch away from beheading him. She could even see her own bloodthirsty face reflected in his eyes.
Why?
The reason doesn't matter, only the end result.
And what do you expect the result to be.
Vran will force my hand, I do not doubt that. What I doubt is which side Ahri will be on. He can still be an ally.
Foolish.
We shall see. If he sides with Vran... Vestara let her thoughts trail off as she placed a hand on the cool transparasteel window. *Then in this endeavor you wish me to undertake, I truly am alone.*
[-Chapter End-]

Chapter 3
[-I-]
It was a month in, and preparations to select the first factions to settle on rehabilitated worlds were in full swing over on Formos, the starport rapidly being transformed into a structure that could handle a mass influx of voters. On several of the larger, more socially stable vessels in orbit, similar booths were being created. The young Jedi who had motivated the change, given that they had never held an election in their lives, were relying heavily on Governor Nugget and the expertise of Aduba advisors to help smooth out any wrinkles.
The main issue that had popped up was that a couple of the strongmen in orbit had realized that their tactics hadn't endeared them many friends and were now in a panic mode when they realized that they would probably be stuck in orbit. Kani and Jun were spending most of their time in heavy negotiations to keep these strongmen from becoming desperate enough to do something unconstructive. The two teens were greatly aided by the arrival of an Aduba taskforce sent to oversee the vote; military vessels trumping the aging ships held by most of those in orbit.
Even then, it had been an exhausting, non-stop job for everyone involved as they all wanted to get the elections done quickly but fairly. The team of young Jedi had added challenges heaped up onto their plates as well. Josat was working night and day with the various health and science professionals—earning a new nickname 'Doc' in the

process. While Cappricia and Ben were choosing which planets out of the dozens in the sector were the best option for terraforming and coordinating the distribution of materials needed to terraform said planets. Needless to say, the teenagers definitely appreciated any downtime that came their way.
Since apparently even breakfast wasn't sacred.
The team was eating with the rest of the Formos security staff in the cafeteria of the spaceport when they saw the Lepi governor enter and head straight towards them. Eyes darting to the governor and reading his mood, the teens quickly shoveled as much food into their mouths as they could and prepared for the day's challenges.
"Governor," Josat waved and started to stand.
Nugget waved him off, gesturing for him and the others to sit. "Enough of that. I actually came here to see if you Jedi can do me a favor. Well, more than you're already doing anyways."
"We'd be happy to help," Kani spoke for the group.
"On the planet Formos Besh there's a massive settlement," Nugget began, tossing each of the Jedi a datapad. "Nearly a quarter of a million people, all that's left of the planet's population after the Vong roasted the planet into a dustball."
"There used to be twenty million people!" Cappricia gasped aloud, devouring the datapad's information.
"Yeah," Nugget said dryly. "The Vong like their death-counts staggering don't they?"
"What's the favor?" Ben asked.
"I know you Jedi are scheduled to visit a neighboring system to check out a planet to restore, but I have a last-second change of plans. Instead, I'd like for you Jedi to oversee a supply convoy to the central settlement on Formos Besh. I got word from Aduba Prime that several supply convoys and military patrols have gone missing lately. Losing the colony on Formos Besh is something none of us want. I figured that if there are a bunch of marauding pirates out there, and though I could send the reinforcements Aduba sent over, I think the pirates will think twice before attacking a Jedi-guarded shipment."
"We can definitely do that," Ben nodded.
"Formos Besh was one of the planets we were considering restoring," Cappricia perked up, looking to Ben. "We can get started on it a bit early and help deliver the supplies at the same time."
"Great, I'll keep the preparations for the vote going," Nugget said. "You can trust me on that. I've even gotten Aduba to send over another few squads to help make sure things go smoothly."
"Expecting any problems?" Ben asked.

"No pirate activity in system," Nugget shrugged. "But you never know. Whoever has been taking the convoys, they've managed to give several Aduba Starhopper Security-Home Lance Echelons a good spanking; and that's gotten the people back at the capitol hopping mad."
"Aduba Starhopper Security-Home Lance Echelons… doesn't that abbreviate to…" Josat began.
"I didn't choose the name, Doc," Nugget glared, waving his morning meal of orange space-root at the young Jedi. "Anyways. It never hurts to be careful. Especially with elections coming around the corner. This day and age, you never know what creepy-crawlies are out there."
"We'll get the supplies delivered, governor," Ben said with a tilt of his head.
"Great. The convoy leaves in an hour." Nugget left their table and then moved on to another, receiving various updates and relaying information at the same time.
The Jedi hastily finished the last of their breakfast. Despite the seemingly innocuous nature of their mission, all five teens could sense something brewing in the Force. They exchanged one long look at each other, and then smiled faintly.
"We did want an adventure," Jun said, hurrying with his friends out of the room.
"Setting up an election and glaring down despots in space isn't adventure enough?" Ben bantered.
"Compared to whatever it is the Force is trying to tell us, no," Josat shook his head. "Then again, we could just be imagining things, right?"
"All five of us can feel it though," Cappricia piped up. "Whatever we're going to encounter is going to be a lot more than pirates."
"We stick together, work as a team, and we'll get through this." Ben said.
"We'll follow your lead," Kani confirmed. "No matter what the Force throws our way."
"Pirates, insane bantha, and all," Josat nodded.
[-II-]
"Formos Besh?" Vran looked to Vestara in surprise.
"Yes," Vestara said both to him and the members of her team as she leaned on a control console. They were currently using a captured frigate as their base of operations, Ship stowed in its hangar bay. Made more complicated were the reinforcements the Circle of Lords had sent after receiving the first few captured vessels. Apparently the early success had whetted their appetite for more. She was now 'in charge'

of nearly thirty members of the Tribe. "You wanted a target apart from the Star Destroyer, Vran. This is it."
"Why there though?"
"The Formos system is on the edge of the Aduba Hegemony control," Vestara said. "This means that it will take at least two or three days for any reinforcements to arrive. At the same time, according to the information we have in the databanks, it is beleaguered by refugees with minimal military support. Formos itself has a population of billions, most all in ships. Formos Besh, however, has two smaller colonies. Survivors of a past war it seems. We raid these colonies for what they are worth. Given how the colony is surviving in inhospitable climes, we will capture any scientists, engineers, and people who can be of use to the Tribe. Much of the technology in the ships we have captured is far beyond what we have at home, and we can only go so far with the knowledge we've ripped from the engineers who served on them."
"Correct me if I'm wrong," Sith Saber Aithrawis spoke up. "But do the databanks we have not say that Jedi Skywalker and his team is in system? I thought you wanted to avoid conflict until we are ready."
"Normally, they would be," Vestara said. "But Tyro Ahri Rass and Ber Sar'dak managed to decrypt the databanks of the starliner we captured this morning. In it was the itinerary of the Jedi Skywalker sent to nearby Aduba Starhopper Security vessel for the purposes of his safety and freedom of movement. Starting today, he is due to take his team on a week-long trip through two nearby systems. He will be lightyears away from the Formos system by the time we get there."
"The plan of attack then?" Vran said gruffly.
"So you approve my target choice?" Vestara said mildly.
"A soft target is better than none."
Vestara smirked behind her mask at the small victory. "We will go in Ship and two of the cargo tenders. I do not want to risk any of the military ships we have captured thus far. From the data recovered, there are no defenses at these colonies apart from a local militia. We deal with the militia, kidnap who we need, and have Ship burn the rest of the colony to ash."
"I will lead the strike team then," Vran growled in a deep voice.
"As Saber Vran says," Vestara said almost mockingly. "In the meantime, I will remain on Ship and keep an eye out for any complications. Just because Formos itself has minimal defensive forces, doesn't mean they can't become a problem."
"And we do not attack Formos itself, why?" Kaara voiced monotonously.

"They have planetary turbolaser cannons, fighter squadrons, and several tens of thousands of ships in orbit," Vestara supplied. "When we are strong enough, maybe then. But not right now."
"Understood," Kaara replied emotionlessly, almost the exact opposite of her brother's bloodthirsty aura.
Vestara looked to the others. "Though this attack has merit, I believe we are making a mistake. However, I also agree that we can be doing more to further the Tribe's strength. Prepare yourselves. Saber Vran, the team you take with you will be your choice."
"As you say," Vran said, mimicking Vestara's earlier tone.
"Return victorious," Vestara said evenly. "For the Tribe."
The others responded in kind. "For the Tribe!"
[-III-]
"We all good to go?" Ben Skywalker smiled at the others. Dressed as he was, however, they could only sense the smile behind the heavy cloth wrapping that covered his face and the black-tinted goggles over his eyes.
"Oh sure, I love dressing up in several layers to travel through a freezing desert," Kani said sarcastically, her voice muffled. "I feel like a Gamorean in a blanket with all these jackets on, can barely move."
"The desert's a few degrees above freezing, with bone-ripping sandstorms," Ben answered, rolling his eyes. "Better to be a Gamorean than frixan bait. How about you all?"
"I'm part fish, my people aren't meant to go through a desert," Cappricia chirped, awkwardly waving her thick jacket-encased arms like bird wings.
"It's going to take forever to get the sand out of my fur," Jun added.
"I'm ready," Josat said with an upbeat grin. His small form looked ridiculous weighed down by the heavy coverings he had on. "Always wanted to travel through a sandstorm on a speeder."
"Crazy enough to be a Skywalker," Kani said deadpan, shaking her head.
"Or Solo, that's why he and my cousin get along so well," Ben teased the younger teen. He looked to the Shapers with them. "Master Shaper Paasar, are your people ready?"
"We are. We do feel guilty that these sandstorms are a result of our people's destruction of this planet."
"It's in the past now," Ben shook his head. "Focus on healing and the future."
"As you say. We are ready Jedi Knight Skywalker."

Ben clapped his hands together and then patted each member of the team on the shoulder. "Alright, let's go assure the convoy people we know what we're doing."
Stepping out of the prefab shelter at the landing site and into the harsh, heavily filtered sunlight of Formos Besh, the team blinked to adjust to the change in light. Awaiting them was the convoy of over two dozen speeders, cargo-lifters, and hover-craft all laden with supplies meant to help get the planet back onto its feet. Once a thriving agrarian world that provided food for Formos and the nearby systems, Formos Besh had been home to a small Yuuzhan Vong resistance movement and subsequently paid the price. Now it was little more than a ball of glazed sand and arid mountains, with violent sand and ion storms making most of the planet inaccessible by starship.
Ben Skywalker held up a hand towards the members of the Aduba-based ground forces—from the Aduba Security Sentinel-Heavy Assault Teams—sent to help them out. "Morning."
"Good morning, Jedi Skywalker," the Weequay captain in charge greeted in turn, trying to sound professional but not completely hiding his boredom. Like the young Jedi and the Yuuzhan Vong, he was wrapped in thick cloth from head to toe, a breathing mask distorting his voice.
"We all set to go?"
"Just awaiting your word. The mobile shield generators we brought should keep any storm we run into at bay. Given the nature of this mission, I brought a bunch of rookies with me who wanted to see you Jedi in the flesh."
"Well, we're not much to look at," Ben said depreciatingly towards the other militia members. "Should be a relatively dry milk run here. You all know the mission?"
"Yes sir, taking these supplies to the mountain settlement of Xim'nal and to make that the focal point of the restoration of this planet."
"It was rhetorical, but thanks," Ben chuckled, hopping up onto the central vehicle of the convoy. It was a giant hovercraft easily the size of a middle-sized frigate, with multiple hover platforms as big as X-wings ready to keep it afloat. "Relax private, just enjoy the sunlight and fresh air."
"Yes, sir."
"Please, don't call him 'sir,'" Kani chuckled leaping onto an adjacent cargo-lifter laden with strapped down crates. "And don't call me ma'am either."
"Yes ma…Jedi….errr…"

"Just call me Kani," she laughed as her vehicle started up. "It's my name after all. And call our Fearless Leader 'Ben,' 'Jedi Skywalker' if you really have to."
The other Jedi and militia members began piling onto their assigned craft, the sound of repulsorlifts and engines activating filling the air and sending up large plumes of loose sand everywhere.
"*Hey Ben*," Kani said into her comlink built into her breath-mask. "*Comm-check, you read me?"*
"Loud and clear," Ben replied. "Fishsticks, Chatterbox, Furball, you all read?"
"*Roger,"* Cappricia chimed.
"*All ready to roll*," Josat answered in turn.
"*The rearguard is ready and I read you just fine,*" Jun rounded out the check.
Ben nodded to the driver in the enclosed cab of their massive hover-platform, giving the Aqualish a thumbs-up. "Then get yourselves strapped in, we have over seven-dozen kilometers to go."
Ben followed his own advice and clicked his safety line into the side of the cab, then settled down on a crate of goods as his vehicle began to surge forward.
"*Such wondrous sights out here, Fearless Leader*," Kani quipped. The movement of all their vehicles made the already particulate-matter-filled sky almost as dark as night. Only the faint orange glow in the sky signaled that the sun was still up. "*Instead of a big light blur now all we can see is a big dark blur. Visibility can't be more than a few dozen meters in any direction.*"
"How convenient," Ben chuckled. "Besides you volunteered for this so don't blame me. You saw the briefing. There's nothing to see out here. Even the sand grains are more boring than the ones on Tatooine. It's just an entire planet made up of desert."
"*You know, the odds of more than one planet being made up entirely of the same, single geographical feature are pretty high,*" Josat added his own two cents in as the unchanging vista around them continued to pass them by. "*I mean, unless Tatooine was also an agrarian world once and was bombarded to the stone-age..."*
"*It was*," Cappricia said brightly, eager to impart her own wisdom. "*In the temple archives of Ossus there was mention that Tatooine might have been a jungle world. Maybe someone bombarded the heck out of that planet too. It's not like the galaxy has gotten any more peaceful since that time."*
"*You don't have to sound so happy about the possibility of a planet being blown to bits*," Jun said wryly.

"*I wasn't…well…not about that. I just think that someone should study what happens to these worlds that we reckless mortals ruin, and try to make some standard to repair them. Ossus benefitted greatly from Master Skywalker's decision to turn it into a Jedi haven again. So if we come up with some formula to repair devastated worlds, things will go so much easier.*"
"*Doesn't Tenandro Industries have something like that in place*?" Josat asked. "*I know they use their atmospheric cleanser ships in conjunction with Yuuzhan Vong shaping practice to make atmospheres livable again.*"
"*But those cost millions, if not billions of credits,*" Kani inputted. "*I've seen some of the progress reports. Even under Chief of State Hamner, the restoration of Eriadu's two continents after the Vong reprisal attacks was a hundred billion credits and it took three years. Commenor needed ten years and over a trillion credits to get it to a recognizable shape. Most planets just don't have that kind of resources available.*"
"She's right," Ben agreed. "If the Galactic Alliance wanted to really help the people out here, they'd be spending that same amount of credits to terraform this planet. You don't really see any sponsors lining up for an Outer Rim dust-ball controlled by people not in their pockets do you?"
Ben couldn't help but grimace as he said it. On one hand he supposed that he should be disappointed that his first assignment was little more than a political stunt mixed with baby-sitting duty. On the other, he knew that not every mission he received would be of the utmost galactic importance. He knew his cousins had all gone through one form of hell or another by the time they had reached his age. His own Cousin Jacen had even regaled him with the tale of how he had been tossed off the edge of Cloud City at the tender age of fifteen. Jaina had told him about the time 'Uncle' Zekk had nearly killed her as a member of the Shadow Academy. And Anakin had nearly been killed by a Yuuzhan Vong amphistaff at just seventeen years of age. He supposed he should be lucky that the closest he had ever gotten to a near-death experience lately was eating some exotic cooking made by older Jedi Thann Mithric—apparently what Falleen considered delicious wasn't the safest for human consumption.
The minutes ticked by slowly, the large cargo-laden speeders barely able to go above a few kilometers an hour. The only bright side was that the sand-cloud they had kicked up had finally died back down as they began to traverse some of the more glassed portions of the planet. The almost obsidian quality of the ground beneath soaked up

the meager sunlight, large jagged shards falling to the side as the repulsorlifts pushed them aside.
All around was a dead planet, with not a single plant or animal to be seen.
"You sure you guys can fix this world, Master Shaper?" Ben said into his comm, not really feeling any optimism on his part. Then again, Yuuzhan Vong shapers were renowned for their biots.
"*Where there is life there is the Yun'o*," the Yuuzhan Vong answered in affirmative. "*The Yun'o exist in all living things and so long as they exist we can do their will.*"
Ben closed his eyes in a silent groan at the response. *Just my luck that the Shaper's a Jeedai cultist.*
"*Fearless Leader*," Kani's dry admonishment at his thoughts caused Ben to grin ruefully.
"Yeah, I know, I know. It's my cousins' fault. And I'm glad you think so, Master Shaper. I'd hate for us to have come out here for nothing."
"*Are we there yet*?" Josat sighed. "*I can't imagine a more boring planet. I don't know what the Shapers are talking about but I can't sense anything living at all. And Master Tekli's way is that of the Living Force.*"
"Well you can't sense Master Shaper Paasar or his people either," Ben reasoned.
"*Good point*."
"*Yes, Jedi* ***Knight*** *Skywalker makes them from time to time,"* Kani teased.
"How are things looking from your speeder, *Apprentice* Asari?" Ben shot back.
"*Sandy, brown and black, dull.*"
"*Same here,*' Josat said.
"Who asked you, Chatterbox?"
"*Sorry, were you flirting with your girlfriend?"*
"*He was*," Cappricia giggled.
"We're not like that, Fishsticks," Ben shook his head in amusement, grateful they couldn't see his face. "She's just my best friend."
"*I'm just his best friend*," Kani said at the same time.
They heard Jun hum a children's tune about amorous relations in a tall arboreal construct.
"Hey, aren't you guys supposed to be respecting me. I'm a Jedi Knight you know," Ben protested. Through his bond with Kani he could feel that she was just as embarrassed and awkward about the turn the conversation had taken. They *were* best friends after all.
"*Right, forgive us Jedi Knight Skywalker,*" Josat said.

"Thank you. You're forgiven."
"*We'll just make fun of Jedi Apprentice Asari instead*," Josat added mischievously.
"*Be nice Josat or I'm telling Cassa on you,*" Kani said smugly.
"*Jun let's make fun of Fishsticks instead,*" Josat said just as quickly.
Jun coughed something that sounded suspiciously like 'coward,' before speaking. "*Sure, why not. Do I have to come up with some sort of 'fish-in-a-barrel' metaphor?"*
"*Hey!"* Protested the Melodie. "*So not fair! Kani make them make fun of you. I'm just the innocent archivist in training."*
The trip continued onwards, with light banter punctuating the otherwise long and monotonous trip. Several of the militia finally worked up the nerve to join the conversation when they realized that the Jedi they were with weren't some untouchable mystics but truly a bunch of teenage kids.
The low-powered shield-generators hummed to life just before a sandstorm dropped their visibility to zero, its faint blue shell around the convoy flickering as grains of sand traveling at speeds faster than the convoy bombarded it from all directions. But the shields held, keeping out the sand as well as the howling winds that would have stripped the flesh of any living being caught in it. The convoy continued on, uncaring of the change of scenery.
After a few minutes of watching the storm rage around them, Ben fell silent and just listened in on the various conversations going on. Cooking recipes were being exchanged by Josat and two of the guards. Cappricia was 'interrogating' another pair about the history of the system and of Aduba. Jun, one of the Yuuzhan Vong, and the militia captain were discussing politics. And even Kani was talking to another few militiamen, just getting to learn about their families and what they usually did when not riding along in a giant supply convoy on a war-ruined planet.
He had only just dropped into a meditative trance when he felt something off in the Force. Frowning, he lowered himself onto his heels and focused, stretching his presence out across the vast desert of a planet. His mind brushed against something that radiated shock and surprise for a fraction of a second before vanishing completely. A normal Jedi might not have been able to find that presence again, but Ben had been trained by *the* Jacen Solo. He also had the Skywalker tenacity genes, and immediately sharpened his focus in the general direction of the other presence.
He found it, and then felt an oily darkness try to draw his mind into it as if the presence was quicksand. Now it was Ben's turn to be

surprised. The presence was growing closer, rapidly, and wouldn't let go of his mind.
Jedi! Jedi! Jedi! The alarm and fury echoed like stray ball bearings inside his head.
Ben fought against the presence, but it was powerful, much more than he had ever sensed before. He also got the distinct impression that the presence wasn't alive either. He knew from the Iron Knights that mechanical sentience could wield the Force. The only problem was that the presence he was sensing was decidedly dark in nature. Dark and doing its best to tear his own mind to shreds. It was taking all of Ben's concentration to fend off the attacks, never mind trying to escape.
Curiosity killed the Nexu after all, Ben cursed. As he warded off the next round of mental assaults, his enhanced senses picked up something else. This mechanical, dark, Force-wielder wasn't the only presence coming his way.
What the kriff? Ben let out a groan of pain as several more presences joined the mental battering of his mind.
Then, as if he had suddenly been jettisoned in an escape pod, Ben felt himself break free. He came to, finding himself on his back and staring into a pair of determined purple eyes. Kani's hands were gripping the sides of his head, her jaw clenched and a trail of blood that matched his dripping from her nose. Behind her were the other members of his team, their hands and Force-presences joined in a protective meld.
"Hey," he said with a hoarse smile. His smile then fell away as he remembered just how he ended up on his back. "Weapons out, sound the alarm, we're going to be attacked."
"What?" Cappricia said. "Pirates?"
"Right, like pirates could turn his brain to scrambled eggs," Kani said tersely, freeing her lightsaber and wiping away the blood trail.
"*Contact! We have contact! Unknown contacts coming up behind us fast!*" Came the alarmed cry of the militia captain.
"Tell the Yuuzhan Vong transport to break-off and head to Rally Point Dorn," Ben said quickly. "And then get clear of the main convoy if you can!"
The convoy began to break apart into smaller groups, but the threat was already on them. A dark shadow swooped by overhead and two bright beams of light burned outwards in an almost blinding flash. The shield protecting the convoy was not designed to withstand such devastating energy. Immediately, several of the cargo-lifters vanished in a blaze of fire. The explosion lifted up their shattered hulks and sent them flying through the air, peppering the desert with burnt shards of twisted metal. The spherical shadow made an almost impossible about

face and came back around for another pass, annihilating an entire column of speeders and supplies vehicles in a single pass. The heat, sound, and light stunned the young Jedi, not expecting anything remotely like what was happening. A third pass, bisecting the convoy horizontally this time, ripped apart the convoy like a starving wampa through tauntaun.
The ship disappeared into the shrouded sky just like a ghost, but the sense of danger persisted. The few remaining elements of the convoy split up, with the Yuuzhan Vong Shaper-holding landspeeder pulling away and out of danger.
Ben struggled to his feet, pushing aside Kani's restraining hand and pulling out his lightsaber.
"Ben!" Kani protested.
"We have to get ready! That ship wasn't the only thing! The captain said 'contact*s*'!"
The young Jedi shook themselves at his words and quickly scrambled over the cargo containers to get to the top of the massive hover-platform. They sprinted across the bundles of supplies, leaping over taller crates, running along longer ones, until they were at the back and gazing at the aft of the ruined convoy. The flaming remains of dozens of destroyed speeders and cargo-loaders littered the fast disappearing ground, swallowed up by the storm as the shield-generator bearing speeders pressed forward with the rest of the convoy.
Then, almost impossibly they made out the forms of three speeder bikes emerging out from the lethal sandstorm. The trio of riders were clad in black cloaks, their faces hidden behind angular masks. The moment they were in range they all sprang off their speeders, crimson or purple lightsabers activating as they landed on the cargo-speeders at the rear of the convoy.
"Ben," Kani said tersely, her icy blue lightsaber blade shrouding one half of her body in its cool light while the other was lit up in the viridian green of Ben's own saber—a new one made to honor his advancement to Jedi Knight.
"I know," Ben said worriedly.
"Those are fully trained dark Jedi," Josat paled, sensing the aura the group was emitting and barely controlling his urge to run in terror.
"I know," Ben said again. He did a double-take. "Where's your lightsaber Josat?"
"I…I never made one," Josat stammered. "I'm training to be a healer!"
"I have one but I've never used it for real," Cappricia said in a panic, her yellow eyes showing the same terror gripping the healer of their

group. She weakly held up her lightsaber, its blade still deactivated. "I never passed Level Five of ORDER."
Ben and Kani looked at each other. Of the twenty levels in the program, most combat minded apprentices could pass levels one through eight of the Ossus Remote Development and Enrichment Regiment in their sleep. Both he and Kani were at level fifteen, and could get through sixteen if they really, really tried.
Jun's sun-yellow blade flared into existence, he himself at level thirteen of ORDER. "Well, three of us, three of them. At least the dark Jedi are playing fair."
The dark shadow swooped in once more, this time stopping directly over the front portion of the mammoth hover platform the Jedi were on. A hatch opened, and three more shadows dropped down. They landed with silent thuds. But more importantly, when they landed, their lightsabers activated.
"Me and my big mouth," Jun groaned.
The three speeder-arrived dark Jedi continued to leap-frog their way across the moving convoy and killing the drivers of the speeders they landed on. The three deposited dark Jedi nonchalantly ambled across the top of the cargo crates towards the Jedi, their lightsabers held out at their sides.
His eyes flickering across their surroundings and their situation, Ben released a low breath and deactivated his lightsaber. With slow and deliberate movements he brought his goggles back up over his eyes. "I have a plan."
Kani deactivated her own lightsaber, covered her eyes with her own goggles and groaned as she sensed her best friend's thoughts. "It's what I get for being best friends with a lunatic."
"Do I even want to know why we're restricting our vision?" Jun sighed.
"It gets even better," Ben said faintly, shedding the outer layers of his clothing until he was clad in just his Jedi robes, head wrap, goggles, and breath mask.
His actions appeared to get the attention of the dark Jedi, who slowed their approach in confusion.
"They're slowing down," Cappricia said nervously.
"The standard response to dark Jedi approaching probably isn't to put on a strip-tease," Josat said, weakly as he too also shucked the heavy protective garments. "Which begs the question, just why are we stripping down to our Jedi robes?"
"Better maneuverability," Kani answered for Ben, who had dropped into a kneeling position with his hands folded in front of him.
"Okaaay," Josat shook his head.

"They're moving fast again," Cappricia alerted, panic in her voice.
"Remember guys, the Force is with us," Kani said.
"It's with them too," Jun pointed out to the leaping dark Jedi.
"Hang on, we're going for a ride," Kani gritted out.
"What?" Josat and Cappricia mimicked Kani's usage of the Force and anchored themselves onto the top of the cargo crate they were standing on.
And then the two shield-generators protecting the remains of the convoy shut down. All at once a deafening roar filled the silent vacuum. Sand swirling about at dozens of kilometers an hour washed over the convoy in a blinding quickness that caught the dark Jedi off-guard. Two of the dark Jedi had been in mid-leap and were immediately blown away in the sandstorm before they even realized what had happened. One of the dark Jedi standing on the giant hover-platform was likewise blown over the side, his startled cry inaudible in the deluge that had consumed them all. Smaller speeders were buffeted away by the howling winds, disappearing in the sandy maelstrom in the blink of an eye.
No sound could be heard outside the howling winds, no one could see anything in front of them—which would have been the end of most any fight apart from one between two Force-sensitive sides. Red and purple blades sprang to life once more, casting mal-intentioned spheres of light in the skin-rending storm. Yellow, green, and blue blades likewise emerged. Both sides seeking each other out through the Force.
And then the storm ended.
The battered and smoking convoy emerged out into another stretch of glassy ground. The sand-covered Jedi and their counterparts now had a clear view of one and other and wasted little time starting for one and other.
Ben thrust his hand out and sent two loose cargo bins flying at a female dark Jedi with a purple lightsaber. At least he assumed she was female by the way she filled out her black battle-suit. His target sprinted towards him, heedless of the projectiles and cleaved one of them in two on her way. Ben leaped backwards and landed on another cargo-lifter and purple-saber followed him down.
On top of the main hover-platform both Jun and Kani abandoned any pretense of Force combat and charged straight towards their own opponents. They exchanged a flurry of blows, Kani's blue and Jun's yellow flashing and flaring against their two red-bladed opponents faster than the normal eye could follow. They jumped, swept, parried, riposted, and danced about atop the unsteady and battered cargo containers of the primary hover-platform.

An additional yellow blade sprang out of the back of Jun's lightsaber, and he whirled his saberstaff in an intricate arc which left yellow afterimages in its wake. His powerful saber slammed down onto the saber of one of the two remaining red-bladed dark Jedi in a violent hiss of energy. The dark Jedi parried and countered, but Jun's saber whirled again and knocked the attack aside. With several quick movements of his saberstaff Jun caught the unprepared dark Jedi off-guard and managed to slice off the lower section of the dark Jedi's mask. The dark Jedi retaliated with a flurry of his own, red blade pushing the young teen on the defensive as the dark Jedi's fury empowered him.
Before the dark Jedi could attack again, however, Kani's blue saber whipped around in a sidewise arc, distracting Jun's target and forcing the dark Jedi to leap off the hover-platform or be impaled by Jun's saberstaff. Jun followed the dark Jedi with a feral growl, giving the dark Jedi no reprieve.
Her own saber not making it back to her hand thanks to a blast of Force-energy by her opponent, the apparently unarmed Kani bent over backwards to avoid an impalement of her own, then rolled to the side as the dark Jedi stabbed downwards. She continued to roll, narrowly avoiding strike after strike. Finally, she ran out of room on the crate to roll. She could feel the smug cockiness coming from her own opponent and smirked at his masked face in turn. With a Force-assisted push-up, Kani propelled herself over a small gap and onto another cargo crate.
The dark Jedi frowned behind his mask. Kani bent low, weaving like a snake, and held out her hands. From out of her sleeves a shoto shot into each of her hands.
"What?!" The dark Jedi growled.
Kani smirked, two blue blades activating. "Didn't think it'd be that easy now, did you?"
The dark Jedi readjusted his pose to ensure that his impressive biceps strained against the leather of his battle-suit. "You can't hope to win, little girl."
Kani said nothing, darting towards the dark Jedi instead. But he held out his hands and hit her with a powerful Force-push. She landed on her feet on the edge of the hover-platform, her short-sabers parrying his attempt to slice her legs off. A cargo crate flew out from another speeder and knocked her opponent backwards, giving the blond-haired Jedi room to regain her footing and her guard. She acknowledged Ben's assist with a small burst of gratitude through their bond, and then refocused on her opponent. The dark Jedi was definitely the better fighter, she knew that. It would have to be her brains that kept her alive, since no amount of Force usage or saber swinging on her part

would help her come out ahead. She hazarded a glance towards Jun, and their eyes locked for a fraction of a second. Another plan was born.
"You're fight is with me," Ben heard his attacker state tonelessly, shortly before a stream of Sith lightning flashed into existence. After trading Force-attack after Force-attack with her, he could feel his strength flagging. He wouldn't be able to go toe-to-toe with her much longer. His only hope was that she wasn't aware of just how much strength he had left.
He caught the purple energy along the length of his lightsaber, making sure that his own footing was secure in the process. "Lady, I don't know who you are, and I don't care. Well, scratch that, I actually do care. *Who* are you?"
"Why does it matter?" the dark Jedi said without emotion, realizing her lightning attack wasn't working, she instead sent a cargo crate flying at Ben.
He used the Force to knock it aside. "Well, generally it's polite to tell the person you're trying to kill your name."
"You're going to be dead anyways, Jedi. As are your friends. There's no point." She slashed at the engine housing of their cargo-lifter, forcing them both to abandon their mount or disappear in the ball of shrapnel it became a few seconds later.
"We have a difference in opinion," Ben tried, staring at her from over the gap between the speeders they were on. He gestured to the side. "You see, my friends and I work as a team. From what I've seen, you dark Jedi aren't exactly the social types."
The dark Jedi he was facing hazarded a look to her compatriots and was clearly surprised. Jun and Kani were switching opponents back and forth, throwing the dark Jedi off by the change of styles and combat techniques. Even when the dark Jedi tried to corral Kani or Jun onto one hover-platform or speeder, the two younger Jedi somehow coordinated their escape.
"There's also one other thing," Ben commented evenly.
"And that is?"
"You only have one ship," Ben said. "The Aduba Hegemony has a fleet of them."
"And?"
"Well, I have more than two friends with me," Ben said mildly. "And the hover-platform they're on has a hyperspace comm-system."
Ben's opponent answered with another barrage of lightning, but not at Ben.
The young Jedi Knight hurled himself in a desperation leap at another speeder as her attack ripped apart the speeder he had been standing

on. He barely managed to grab onto the side, though his body's lower half bounced rather painfully across the sharp ground a few times before he could pull himself up. Trying to catch his breath, Ben briefly reflected that ORDER was helpful if he wanted to fight a swarm of remotes. Not so much against a living, lightsaber-wielding girl wanting to kill him. And he really hope he didn't run into any more of them in the near future. Said current lightsaber-wielding-wanting-to-kill-him girl leaped from her speeder and to one closer to his.
Ordinarily he would have been in trouble, had not the spherical ship that had caused so much havoc dip down again. Standing in the doorway was another masked female.
"Kaara! Vran! Aris! Get your asses back on board! We have a fleet-group inbound!"
"Some other time, Kaara," Ben couldn't help but murmur, his gaze was locked on the figure in the ship's airlock. He could feel her gaze on him as well and knew that it wouldn't be the last time they'd meet.
"Count on it, Jedi."
The three dark Jedi leaped back up into the ship, glowering at the Jedi as the airlock door closed. The dark Jedi's ship left one last parting shot, firing its twin beams of light at the front of the giant hover-platform and turning most of it into a flaming wreck, before rocketing up and out of the atmosphere.
Ben deactivated the speeder he was on and rolled off its side, completely spent. He didn't know who these dark Jedi were, only that his 'milk run' propaganda mission to Aduba had just become a lot more complicated.
[-IV-]
"What's going on!" Vran yelled. "We had them!'
Vestara gestured to the sensor systems. "Over three-dozen fighters and four light-support vessels are heading this way. I've told the others to head back to our rally point, but we need to buy their ships time. The Aduba Starhoppers will be on us before we can leave this planet's gravity shadow."
"They must have already been en route before we initiated our attack," Kaara noted. "No way could they have known we were coming."
"Yes," Vestara said. "My thoughts too. The Force definitely wasn't with us this time around."
"One thing we don't have to worry about though," Tyro Aris smirked. "The Jedi we were so afraid of are just kids. Hardly the fearful Jedi Master the simpletons we've interrogate have led us to believe."
"Said kids killed two out of your six," Vestara chastised. "And twenty percent of Tyro Lodic Ko's skin was stripped from his body by the

storm. Added to that, when he hit the ground, he hit his head and has forgotten his name. He might as well be a new person with all the damage done."
"We were caught off guard," Vran grunted. "Even you were surprised that the Skywalker Jedi was here."
"Blame game later," Tyro Ahri called out. "The first fighters will be in firing range in two minutes."
"We fight," Saber Marjaak. One of several Keshiri Force-sensitives on the team said firmly. "Those four support vessels are ships we can use for our cause."
"It's going to be tricky," Vestara warned. On one hand, she knew it would be more prudent to retreat. But on the other, she also knew that she'd lose whatever standing she had with Vran's supporters if she did. The original mission was already franged up beyond repair, and the Jedi now knew that they existed. Retreating would just make the day go worse. Besides, she mentally evaluated the others, she could still sense their bloodlust. "A fly-by and space-walk, teams of four."
"What about the fighters?" Saber Kayala asked.
"Those not taking the ships can take out the pilots," Vestara said. "I will pilot ship."
The plan was made, and the two minutes elapsed with frightening speed. Vestara, in Ship's central chamber, viewed the incoming fighters through the slat of her Sith mask. The Force pulsated all around her, giving her glimpses of possible courses of action, of variations of the immediate future. It fueled her rage, her anger that this plan had been disrupted because of 'bad luck'.
"Fighter-teams, act the moment they're in range. Drop-team One, prepare to board on my signal."
The enemy fighters began shooting at the spherical vessel well beyond the minimum range, their red and green lasers splashing harmlessly through the space around the vessel. Vestara gunned the ship's engines, taking it head-on into the swarm of fighters. For a second, they were in the midst of the lead squadron, the fighters veering away to avoid a collision. Then, as if a switch had been flipped, half of the fighters in the first squadron suddenly stalled in space. A few others, who had been flying in close formation, hadn't expected the stop and plowed right into their fellow fighters.
Vestara ignored the flashes of death through the Force, focusing instead on her first target. The Ship's databanks revealed it to be a 'Blockade Runner,' and mentally supplied her with a tactical readout of the vessel. The Blockade Runner's laser turrets rotated towards Ship as it made its approach, red lasers flashing out at high rates of speed.

"Drop-team One, go!" Vestara ordered, flying over the vessel. Through the Force, she could sense the four Tribe-members land on the outside of the ship, and she banked Ship away from the soon-to-be-captured vessel.
The second squadron of fighters, and what remained of the first, swarmed after Ship. This time warning indicators of warheads being fired flashed on the primary console. Vestara spun the ship around, activating the dual energy cannons at the same time. The twin beams of almost white light flared outwards, swatting the missiles, and a few unfortunate fighters, away. She piloted the Ship directly into the mass of evading fighters, and the Tribe members responsible for neutralizing them went to work. She felt another half-dozen pilots suffer heart-attacks or brain aneurisms, and then another half-dozen as the Tribe members got into the grove of things.
"Drop-team Two, you're up," Vestara called out. A missile exploded off to the side of Ship, shrapnel pinging off its armored surface. The frigate up next was a modified '*Lancer*-class' vessel. Her forces had taken two such ships already, and both had been modified heavily enough that they had at first been mistaken for a different class of vessel. This current frigate apparently had missile-tubes to spare as it fired off a full cluster—sensors said nearly fifteen missiles—at Ship. Explosions erupted all around the dark Jedi-crewed vessel, warning lights indicating that Ship's shields were starting to fail. "In three…two…" Vestara piloted the vessel over the frigate, felt the Tribe boarders off-load, then hurriedly took off again. That pass came at a cost, however, as another missile strike actually breached the sphere's defenses.
"*This is Tyro Rass,*"Ahri called out over the comm. "*That last hit just sucked Tyro Sar'dak and Saber Aithrawis out the breach. Try to avoid getting hit by missiles in the future.*"
Vestara clenched her jaw. There were still two Blockade Runners left to capture, as well as a fighter-squadron and a half to go. One of the Blockade Runners appeared to be a different model than the first, its design more streamlined and heavily armed and armored. She didn't like the odds.
Do not waver, Ship rebuked, its dislike for her weakness felt clearly in the Force.
Forgive me, Vestara said, shaking herself. She pushed Ship to its limits, letting the Tribe pick off the fighters while she worried about evading the heavier lasers from the two remaining light-support vessels. The white beams of Ship flashed repeated to swat down warheads, but she did her best to keep from damaging any of the targets. She decided to pick the streamlined Blockade Runner as her next target. Putting all

available power into the shields, the Ship was forced to weather the blistering barrage of six dual-turbolaser batteries. The control console showed more damage being inflicted on Ship, she could feel the ship vibrate with every impact, but Vestara didn't relent. "Teams Three and Four, both go. This ship is different than the others."
Team Three made it out of Ship. But just as Team Four was offloading, a missile shot from one of the few surviving fighters exploded just outside the airlock. The explosion sent Ship veering sharply into the top of the Blockade Runner, the sounds of metal screeching and shattering shaking the dark Jedi's vessel wildly. Vestara fought to remain control, warning lights and signs of imminent system failures flashing all around her. The offending fighter pilot seemed to have learned his lesson and was staying out of the effective range of the Force-sensitives aboard the ship as he peppered the badly damaged meditation sphere with laser burst after burst.
Fury raced through Vestara, and she re-orientated her ship towards the fighter. It began to break away, but Ship's weaponry was faster. The entire fighter disappeared in a blaze of light, shredded in the blink of an eye. At the same time, Vestara managed to pull Ship away from the Blockade Runner.
"Status, Ahri!"
"*Team Three is in the process of taking the ship. They lost one though when Ship pasted him to the top of the other vessel. Team Four is all dead. Missile got them.*"
Vestara swore silently. "There's still one support ship left and its heading this way."
"*I can take a team and capture it. The fighters are nearly all neutralized anyways.*"
"Do it," Vestara said firmly. "We are going to have something to show for today's work, and an entire attack group would be a nice price for the Circle of Lords."
Ship whirled back into battle, its badly damaged exterior not slowing it down in the slightest. By then, there were no hostile fighters left, the Blockade Runner all on its lonesome. The captain of the ship seemed to realize that fact at the same time as Vestara piloted Ship towards his vessel.
He is fleeing, Ship commented mildly.
Vestara nodded, knowing Ship wouldn't be able to reach the Blockade Runner before it jumped away. Closing her eyes, she immersed herself in the Force and reached out across the void to the bridge of the vessel. Onboard she could feel the lives of the dozen members of the bridge-crew, their increasing panic and despair. She could hear the

captain ordering the vessel to clear the gravity shadow of Formos Besh, the frantic working of the crew to obey. With Ship augmenting her abilities, Vestara continued to scan the bridge crew, looking for a weak link.

Then, she felt it. A crew member who had a family, wanted to see them again. She entered his mind further, increasing his desperation, enhancing the worse-case scenarios flashing through his thoughts. Like a puppet who's strings were being pulled, the bridge crew member shot to his feet, loosening the sidearm at his side. The others on the bridge looked up at him in bewilderment, but—panic still at the forefront of his mind—he drew his weapon and began firing. The captain was the first to go down, followed by the helmsman. Several others quickly leaped on the afflicted crewmember, but the damage had been done.

Vestara withdrew from his mind, then tapped the mind of another. This was a security officer who had entered the bridge at the sound of blaster-fire. She made him believe that the threat hadn't been neutralized, that drastic measures were needed to save the ship. The guard hurled a sonic grenade into the group holding down the afflicted crewmember. The pulse killed all those in range. Vestara released the guard from the hallucination. A surviving crewmember promptly shot the guard in a panic that had nothing to do with the Force. Sensing her job done, Vestara redirected her consciousness back towards her present surroundings and opened her eyes. The Blockade Runner was dead in space, the few minutes of time she had brought enough for Ship to close the distance.

"Tyro Raas, the ship is yours," Vestara said with a triumphant smile. "*For the Tribe*."

Vestara allowed herself to relax after dropping off Ahri's team. The entire engagement had taken less than twenty-minutes, but it had been a nerve-wracking twenty-minutes Between dodging the lasers, missiles, and formulating a plan on the fly, Vestara knew that the Tribe was lucky things had worked out as they did. She contemplated that had these Aduba Starhopper Security apparatus been an actual military force and not a rag-tag backwater militia, the outcome probably wouldn't have been too favorable. As it was, between the two Ben Skywalker killed, and the six Tribe members killed in the fighting, the casualties had been comparatively high.

Was it worth the outcome? The other boarding teams began to report in, the four supporting vessels now claimed for the Tribe. Soon, the unmanned fighters floating in the void would be slaved to the navi-computer of the captured ships, and Kesh would once again receive

the bounty of her team's work. A month and a half of raiding, of capturing vessels, and the Tribe was fast accumulating a small armada. An armada of frigates and lighter support vessels.
Vestara glanced down at the control panel before her and changed the screen. The real prize, the *Victory*-class Star Destroyer, would be proof that she was worthy to lead her people into a new era. Despite being only fifteen years of age and well out of her league in commanding a force of more experienced Sabers and Tyros, Ship had chosen her. And she was going to prove Ship had not been mistaken, would prove that she had what it took to bring the Tribe into alignment with the true teachings of the Sith. She was Saber Vestara Khai, daughter of Saber Gavar Khai and selected heir to the legacies of the ancient Sith of old. She would succeed and cement her place in the tribe, or die with the knowledge that perhaps she was not worthy of such a legacy after all. Standing out, proving one was superior to all others. Such was the way of a Sith in the Lost Tribe.
[-V-]
"That's right, Chief of State, dark Jedi," Ben repeated patiently from the comm-room of Formos Besh's primary colony, Xim-nal. It was the day after the attack, and nerves were still frazzled by what had occurred. "Six of them, all skilled in the ways of the Force. If it wasn't for the sandstorm and the Aduba government, me and my friends would all be dead. As it is, the Adbua force that was supposed to help us secure the elections was completely wiped out. No debris so they were probably captured."
Of course such a briefing wasn't exactly what the Chief of State expected or even wanted to hear. The idea that he had just sent the scion of the Skywalker line into a near-death situation and created an even bigger diplomatic mess couldn't be considered positive in any light. Although the fact that the scion of the Skywalker line still lived was a definite bonus.
"*You are certain they were dark Jedi?"*
"The Joiners Lomi and Welk both did say that the Sith were far from dead," Ben said. "Maybe they were a part of the same Sith faction that Anakin and Jacen encountered on that asteroid a few years back."
"*Impossible. Our intelligence networks would have picked up on it. Your own cousin, Anakin Solo is head of the Galactic Alliance Guard and if there was a threat to the Senate or myself he would have learned about it.*"
"I'm only reporting what I saw, sir," Ben continued. "They were in a ship with considerable firepower and several dozen metric tons of supplies and relief equipment were destroyed in the attack. I think it

goes without saying that the restoration projects in this region of space have fallen even further behind schedule."
"*Maybe it was a mistake thinking you could handle this mission, Jedi Knight Skywalker. Perhaps you and your team should return to Denon for a debriefing. I'll send someone with more experience out with the apologies of the Galactic Alliance."*
"My team and I can handle it."
"*Your report says otherwise.*"
"That's okay, Chief of State," a new voice interrupted.
"*What? Who is this? This is a classified briefing.*"
"Jedi Master Doran Sarkin-Tainer, along with my apprentice, Jedi Knight Kyrelle Frieneil," Doran answered lightly, sauntering into the room without a care. "Don't worry about things over here, Chief of State, we have it covered."
"*Now wait just..."*
The exotic-skinned, dark-haired Kyrelle flicked her wrist and the hologram of the Chief of State flickered off.
Ben blinked at the two of them. "Did you just hang up on the leader of the galactic government?"
"Yup," Kyrelle smiled, her brown eyes alight with mischief. "Hiya, we were in the neighborhood and thought we'd stop by."
"Not that I'm not grateful for your presence, but why…how…?"
"I called them in yesterday," Cappricia entered from behind the duo, looking slightly sheepish. "They always said that if I needed them all I had to do was call. Hope you don't mind, Fearless Leader."
"Was way out of my league with those dark Jedi," Ben shook his head and smiled reassuringly at the younger teen. "Really, Cappricia. Thanks. You too, Master Sarkin-Tainer"
"None of that 'master' business, Jedi Knight Skywalker," Doran said with a smile. "Just Doran, or if you're using call-signs, Adventure Boy. Kyrelle is of course Spirit Girl."
"Great, as Fishsticks said, I'm Fearless Leader. Chatterbox and Fur-ball are running around somewhere with Kani looking into the records of hijacked ships in hopes of making a dark Jedi connection."
"Jedi Apprentice Asari doesn't have a call-sign?" Kyrelle blinked.
"Too scared to come up with the wrong one," Ben smiled.
"Smart," Doran laughed. "I once tried to come up with a nickname for this Mandalorean girl I knew."
"Oh? What happened?"
"Probably should have studied the nuances of Mando'a a bit more before trying to use it. Called her 'copikla' in front of a bunch of other Mandos, nearly had my head ripped off."

"Why? What does it mean?"
"Oh, in more innocent terms, cute, charming. Something I thought you'd call your best female friend."
"And in non-innocent terms?" Cappricia asked, curious.
"Weeeellll," Doran said with an embarrassed grin. "Let's just say copikla is better used for animals or babies. I later learned that, with Mando nuances, if it's used to describe a teenage or grown woman, it's akin to equating them to a pretty face good for…bedroom activities."
"I think I'll just keep calling her Kani," Ben laughed.
"You sure my presence won't cramp your style or anything?" Doran asked. "This is *your* mission, *your* friends."
"I'd rather my style be cramped and my friends be alive than the reverse," Ben answered. "And I wasn't lying earlier. I could really use your help."
"Great, Fishsticks filled us in on what's happening out here. Got to say, you've done a nice job given the materials you had to work with."
"I just lost several metric tons of that material in the desert," Ben said with a sigh. "This colony needed those supplies badly. Now they're talking about abandoning Formos Besh altogether."
"Focus on the positives, Skywalker," Doran shook his head. "One, your entire team is still alive despite going up against fully trained dark Jedi. That's no small feat you know."
"They did the 'staying alive' part," Ben said modestly.
"Two, you've kept order over Formos after letting them know you were restoring planets, despite the billions of different viewpoints and needs. I checked in with the Lepi governor, and the vote is still on despite the loss of the reinforcements."
"Again, Aduba provided most of the knowledge and background to make it possible," Ben shook his head.
"Three," Doran raised an eyebrow, as if challenging Ben to refute the next positive.
"Three?" Ben bit.
"Three, you've protected your Shaper team and, if what Cappricia has told me, are in the process of restoring two planets already."
"Yeah, but now we have several…."
"Hey!" Kyrelle cut him off. "Listen to my master if you know what's good for you. Positive thoughts!"
Ben chuckled softly. "Yeah, sorry about that Master Sarkin-Tainer."
"Forgiven," Doran smiled back. "Now. One problem at a time. If you can convince these people here to hold out for two and a half more weeks, I have a couple of Mandalorian friends who can get some supplies to them."

"But at what cost?" Ben asked, knowing the mercenary-attitudes of the armored soldiers-for-hire.
"Nothing for them," Doran shook his head. "Dinua and Jintar run a successful farmstead, have ties to Clan Skirata. As long as it's just a one-off thing, they can handle supplying a colony of this size."
"Out of the goodness of their hearts?" Ben said, still skeptical.
"Favor for a favor," Doran answered back. "I saved their kids a year ago from a rival clan. They owe me."
"Okay," Ben exhaled. "That takes care of that problem."
"You still going to restore this planet?" Doran asked.
"Planning on it. It's a good thing the Shapers survived that attack too."
"Great. If you want an additional pair of hands, I can have a couple of the Mando Vong-Shapers accompany the resupply ship."
"They exist?" Cappricia said in surprise.
"Many Yuuzhan Vong who survived the war with the Mandos decided to stay, even converted," Kyrelle nodded. "It's actually neat seeing their combat styles and ethos mesh with Mandalorian culture."
"One of the reasons why Dinua and Jintar are so successful is because they have a couple of Shapers enhancing their crop yield and the like," Doran confirmed.
"I'll take all the help I can get then," Ben smiled, feeling the weight slowly leave his shoulders. "Thanks, really."
"Don't sweat it. We're Jedi, right? Looking after the little people is our job, even if it has giant political ramifications to it."
"Okay, so we have Formos Besh wrapped up, and the election stuff going smoothly. Now back to the big problem," Ben said, gesturing to the holo-comm. "My dark Jedi one."
Doran sobered. "Yeah. Look, I want you and your group to continue handling the restoration and election stuff for now. Something about these dark Jedi doesn't seem right."
"What do you mean?"
"Cappricia, she described the ship they used. From her account it sounds like a Sith Meditation Sphere."
"A what?"
"Ancient Sith ship in the time of Marka Ragnos. Used to be all the rage for up-and-coming Sith. Sentient, imbued with the Force, and wicked powerful, the spheres were the pinnacle in Force-tech of those times. Most of the Sith tombs Kyrelle and I stumble upon have some reference or picture of the sphere. Only problem is, there haven't been any intact, functioning spheres in many thousands of years."
"Maybe they found one on one of these backwater worlds?" Ben asked.

"Maybe," Doran shrugged. "Another thing that confuses me is their hijacking of the Aduba security ships. You guys saw six dark Jedi. There had to be dozens more to completely abscond with the taskforce in orbit. But why? Why would dozens of dark Jedi need out-of-date ships. Heck, why is there that many dark Jedi to begin with?"
"What if they come back?" Cappricia spoke up.
Doran looked at the Melodie teen with a grim smile. "There's no 'if,' Cappricia. Dark Jedi are like razor sharks. Once they sink their teeth into their prey, they don't let go. It might not be tomorrow, or next week. But we definitely haven't seen the last of these dark Jedi."
"Then what can we do?" Ben asked, anxious for advice. These *were* his friends' lives on the line after all.
Doran shook his head at Ben. "Positive, Skywalker. Business as usual. Dark Jedi thrive on fear on despair and doubt. The more you let their presence get to you, the stronger they become. We don't know what these dark Jedi have planned, but stopping everything because of it only gives them an early victory. You and your friends keep restoring planets in this sector. After I call the Mandos, Kyrelle and I will scout around and see if we can't uncover anything."
"The two of you against dozens of dark Jedi?" Cappricia squeaked out in terror.
"We're not going to go looking for a fight," Doran laughed. "Just…see if the Force will be kind enough to give us a hint or two."
"Besides, Sannah would flay me alive if I let Adventure Boy do anything too suicidal," Kyrelle piped up.
"True, but then she'd blame me anyways," Doran smirked. He sobered slightly, looking to Ben. "Take care of the stuff you do have under control. Let me worry about the stuff you don't. We're a team after all."
[-Chapter End-]

Chapter 4
[-I-]
Vestara Khai could feel her heart pounding in her chest. Could sense similar anxiety and eagerness radiate out from her fellow Tribe members. This was it, the grand prize. All their eggs in a single basket. All of the Tribe under her command was going to take part in this raid. The Star Destroyer's course had been altered to the Formos system, but if things went right, it'd never make it there with its current crew. Thanks to the lax security measures and the backwater-militia tactics of the Aduba Starhoppers, the Tribe knew that the Star Destroyer was due to make a layover in the nearby Bheriz system. Unfortunately, the Star Destroyer was not the only ship to do so. According to the

intercepted transmissions, the Star Destroyer was merely the centerpiece of an eight-ship fleet, the very backbone of the Aduba Hegemony's military force.
Sheer force alone was not going to work, the eight-ship fleet contained the most advanced ships in the Aduba Hegemony arsenal. Additionally, the *Victory*-class Star Destroyer they were going to try to take had over three-thousand people aboard according to the intel they had. As big as the Tribe's appetite was for violence and the capturing of ships for their cause, even Vran knew when to be subtle.
So many variables, so many ways the mission could go wrong. If the fleet managed to get to the Formos system, then all bets were off. There was no way the Tribe could deal with both conventional and Force-using opponents with the numbers they had.
Guile it was.
"*Galleon-class transport, Ebon Sand-Gem, we have you on our scopes now. Transmit code clearance or be destroyed.*"
"Stow it, *Endeavour*!" Vestara drawled in her best 'seductive' voice she could manage. "I just got the crew through hellfires and back, now lower your shields and let me talk with Admiral Ington. I have news about the pirates that have been harassing us."
"*Who is this? What is your operating number*?"
"I'm the captain's wench," Vestara said sarcastically. "Now either get me Admiral Ington on the line or let me dock. We barely escaped the pirates, and the captain is dead. We don't have time for this."
"*One moment*..."
The line went dead, leaving Vestara and her crew in silence as they approached the armada in their unarmed transport. Their thinking was, the less threatening they were, the more the Aduba Starhoppers would let their guard down.
"Orders, ma'am?" The pilot, Tyro Aris Zin, asked nervously.
"Keep your distance," Vestara ordered evenly. "But don't look like you're trying to keep your distance."
"Should have let Saber Fei do the talking," Marjaak grumped. "You still sound like a school-girl."
"Do you appreciate having your head on your shoulders?" Vestara glared.
"Point taken."
"*Ebon Sand-Gem, permission to dock has been granted. Admiral Ington will be waiting to hear from you personally. Perhaps we can deal with these troublesome pirates before we move on to Formos.*"
"Much appreciated," Vestara said, forcing cheer into her voice as she glared at the others in the cockpit.

"I'm surprised that they still think we're run-of-the-mill pirates," Kaara said evenly.
"From what Ship says, the Sith have not been active for nearly four decades now," Vestara said. "What's more believable; extremely lucky pirates or a handful of marauding dark Jedi?"
"True," Kaara nodded.
"I don't sense any hostility, so they aren't setting a trap," Aris spoke up.
Vestara activated the intercom. "We are docking with the Star Destroyer now. Everyone remember their roles. Once we're in our assigned areas, we vent the rest of the ship. If you can't make it to your assigned area before time is up, Force preserve you."
The Star Destroyer brought the transport into its primary docking bay on the underside of the ship, the docking-claw helping to guide the smaller ship into place. Half the dark Jedi aboard were channeling the Force to make those outside minimize the importance of the transport in their minds. To the hangar crew, there was nothing out of place about the mysteriously reappearing transport. Their insidious mind-warping stretched out through each deck of the vessel, through each person. Those not thinking of the ship immediately forgot that it existed, and those aware of it no longer paid it any mind.
Vestara emerged from the ship flanked by four of the larger members of the Tribe. Given that she was a petite fifteen year old and they in their late twenties, the size difference was definitely striking. Something those waiting for her definitely noticed as their eyes widened. It helped that she was projecting an aura of pure death and terror.
"Wait…" a man, wearing the standard red uniform of the Aduba Starhopper Security-Home Lance Echelons but augmented by a black tri-corner hat, took a step back in stunned shock. His hat fell off his head, revealing a puffy mass of artificially dyed white hair. When he took another step back, his leather boot slid on the hat and dumped him to the ground. She had seen his thoughts, knew that he had been present to dress-down the survivors of the transport and make an example of them. He had anticipated a cowering group of motley individuals, anticipated flexing his military muscle. What had greeted him was not in line with what he had expected at all.
"Admiral Ington," Vestara said, disgust flashing across her face as he continued to crawl backwards on all fours.
The admiral looked to his retinue of a dozen guards. "Kill them!"
Vestara turned her icy gaze to them, raising a single eyebrow. "Do you really want to die for this waste of life?"

The guards looked at the wild-eyed admiral, then at Vestara and her four massive, muscular escorts—all of whom chose that moment to subtly flex. Almost as one, the guards put their weapons down, holding up their hands and shaking their heads.
"Pathetic," Vestara said eyes showing her disdain. "Vran, take care of them."
Vran stepped forward. "And what would you like me to do first? Break their necks?"
Vran made a gesture with both hands, and two of the guards fell to the ground dead. The others tried to back up, but found themselves rooted in place by the others.
"Wait! We surrendered!" One of them protested.
Vestara looked at him almost dismissively. "Your point?"
"We surrendered so you wouldn't kill us."
"If we did the same, would you spare us?" Vestara said evenly. "Or would you put on a sham of a trial to serve your sense of goodness before killing us? Like most things in this galaxy, its kill or be killed. We just got to you first."
The guards all paled further, some losing control of their bowels.
"Vran, we're on a schedule. Dispose of the rest the regular way," Vestara snapped.
"Very well," Vran said cruelly, obviously relishing in the fear the others are emitting. He activated his lightsaber and proceeded to cleave through the others with minimal effort.
Vestara nodded in approval, then turned her attention back to the admiral, who had gone sheet white at how easily his men had been dispatched. She gestured, and he was lifted into the air. "Admiral Orr Ington, a pleasure to meet you. You are going to help us take the ship, right? You wouldn't want to make me mad, right?"
The admiral stammered several times, before nodding manically.
"Good. Tyro Raas, the codes to the engineering systems," Vestara rattled off a string of numbers as she plucked it from the admiral's mind. "Marjaak, the safety overrides and airlock controls."
The admiral began to shudder from the intrusive mind probe.
"He's not going to last much longer," one of her muscular escorts commented.
"He'll last for as long as I need him too," Vestara answered back, continuing to pull the required pieces of eight codes from his mind.
"Vran, security-code overrides."
"Got it," the hulking muscle confirmed.
"Locker-combination," Vestara continued rattling off codes, the admiral convulsing as blood began to drip from his nose. "Aduba high-level

clearances. Shield frequencies. Self-destruct codes. And...databank unlocks."
The admiral jerked once more, his eyes rolling up into the back of his head and body going limp.
"That's all I needed," Vestara said mildly. She bowed her head slightly at the admiral. "Thank you for your assistance."
In a spinning whirl, she decapitated the unfortunate man.
The Tribe members in the ship continued to pulsate their Force cloak, making the entire scene unnoticed by the hangar crews and those observing from the nearby security station.
Vestara whirled to the others as they emerged. "You have your codes. In a half-hour from now I want this ship claimed in the name of the Tribe. Go!"
[-II-]
"*Well, if there's one sure thing about being a Jedi, we definitely unite people*," Josat commented.
"There's that," Ben remarked. He was in the cockpit of one of Governor Nugget's aging Hornet-class interceptors, watching the events unfold almost as predicted.
On the eve of the vote to give the first few factions a brand new planet, the strongmen, despots, and other unsavory leaders who had ruled their part of the floating ring of ships were making their move. Chief among them was the Sunfire Federation. Realizing that their actions hadn't been looked upon favorably by a majority of the several billion people in orbit, they had decided to preempt the vote with a 'hostile takeover attempt'.
"*Hey, we gave them a choice,*" Kani said unsympathetically in the fighter next to his. She had spent the past few weeks with Jun trying to get these various leaders to see reason, but with little to show for it. "*They just made the wrong one.*"
"Governor Nugget, your planetary defense batteries powered up?"
"*Powered and targeted*," Nugget replied, grimly. "*And for the record, I'm all for letting people hang themselves, but what you guys have planned out can be considered a massacre you know."*
"And if we don't stop these guys, they will be the ones massacring people," Ben remarked.
It had been widely known throughout the ring of ships that Governor Nugget's base of operations could only put out enough energy to power a small fraction of the guns he had available. No one acted on it, however, because they never would have been able to take on both the starport and the other factions at the same time. But now that the

various dictators and despots had combined their forces and pulled their resources, they were feeling confident.
What they couldn't have known was that dozens of the smaller factions who were fed up with the Sunfire Federation and friends had donated a few ships for the sole purpose of powering the other cannons. Josat was right in his statement on two accounts. The Jedi had successfully united both the Sunfire Federation and their despotic friends, but also everyone else in orbit against said federation and alliance.
Governor Nugget's starport was now fully armed and operational. Added to the fact was that his fighters, once collecting dust in his hangar for lack of qualified pilots, were all staffed as well. With some advice from Doran, Ben had put out a subtle 'call-to-arms' among the veterans in orbit, and the result was enough veteran pilots to fill an entire wing. The factions that supplied the pilots were promised, in the event they weren't selected to be among the first to get a new planet, that they would be next in line. Added to this were the few squadrons each of the other factions maintained.
"*We have to be careful,"* Cappricia reminded. She was in the telemetry center of the starport to provide a ground's-eye view of things. Despite being antiquated, Governor Nugget's starport had a very advanced array of sensors—built originally to catch smugglers so the ruling government could tax them on whatever goods they happened to be carrying. "*Despite them being bad guys, their combined factions hold a lot of innocent people in orbit. No blasting apart the big ships."*
"*Chances are, the leaders will still be on the bridges of those big ships though*," Jun said. This had been talked about during the build up to the vote. The Jedi and Nugget had all known that the despots would make their move before the date. The only problem was that they had anticipated having the Aduba Security reinforcements during that time. But the loss of the frigate-Blockade Runner support group, and the mysterious delay of the Star Destroyer taskforce had forced the group to compromise.
The despots had scrounged together nearly two whole fighterwings of Uglies, TIEs, and blackmarket fightercraft. Accompanying those were a handful of corvettes, armed luxury yachts, and cargo-ships and other typically non-combat vessels modified with quad-cannons and other armaments. It was more than enough to intimidate most of the other factions in their immediate vicinity, but would have been fodder for Aduba Security.
Without the reinforcements though, things looked a bit dicey. And the lack of reinforcements meant a new plan was needed.

"Here goes nothing," Ben said, silently hoping the Force would continue to be the nice benevolent power it had been the past couple of months. He thumbed the comm. "Sunfire Federation, Tri-Star Alliance, and the Orbital Nation of Righteousness, this is Jedi Knight Ben Skywalker, requesting permission to come aboard before things get too out of hand."
"*The time for talk is over, Skywalker. We won't let you Jedi force a settlement.*"
"Talking has never hurt. Blasters, missiles, lasers do," Ben said. "Do you all truly want to plunge the space over Formos into a full-scale battle? Chances are, one or more of you will die in the fighting. Chances are, one or more of our side will die too. And in the end, what will you be left with? A shattered fleet, a planet that can't be fully inhabited for another month or two, and the entire Aduba government against you. We talk, maybe we can avoid all that."
"*Perhaps you Jedi need to learn some math, but we outnumber your forces at least five to one. You are in no position to bargain.*"
"No, I'm in a perfect position to bargain," Ben countered. "Right now your flagships should be lighting up with warnings of a target lock. Governor Nugget's network of planetary defense batteries are all fully operational."
"*You're bluffing.*"
"Think about it this way. Your group represents about a third of the total ships in orbit. Do you really think the other two-thirds are going to let you do as you please?"
There was a longer pause this time. Ben released several calming breaths, trying to keep his heart at a steady rhythm with several Force meditative exercises. The fact that his fighter was at the forefront of his side's formation meant that he would most likely be shot at first if the negotiations broke down. Of course, since Kani was right next to him, she'd be next. Something he didn't exactly want to think about. *Positive thoughts, Skywalker,* he mentally chastised himself.
His comm chirped again. "*Skywalker, head to the Starlight Eternal's docking bay.*"
"Can I request that my wingman be allowed to come with me?" Ben asked. "She's Jedi Asari, the one most of you have been dealing with these past few weeks."
"*Go ahead. That little girl is hardly a threat*," the voice replied almost patronizingly.
"Much obliged," Ben kept his tone light and fought back a grin, even as he felt Kani's ire spike through the bond. *Now, Kani. Peaceful negotiations.*

Stuff it, Skywalker.
Ben and Kani piloted their fighters to a much larger *Lucrehulk*-class freighter, the hangar bay not exactly looking inviting as they guided their ships to a floating halt. Outside several dozen armed guards were waiting for them, blasters and rockets at the ready. There were even two E-web blaster turrets and an internal turbolaser defense cannon all aimed at their fighters.
Doing their best to seem unfazed by the display of might, both Ben and Kani nonchalantly powered down their fighters and popped the canopy. Landing on the cargobay floor and straightening, they briefly used the Force to search for the mercenary in charge. Using their bond to reinforce each other's nerves as the blaster barrels all around them followed their every movement, both Kani and Ben made their way to the boss.
"Hiya, we were invited," Ben said, waving to an older, molted looking Neimoidian in armor that looked two-sizes too big.
"Your lightsabers," the Neimoidian gestured.
Ben and Kani glanced at each other, then shrugged and handed over their weapons.
"We're here for peaceful negotiations," Ben said evenly. "But we would like them back on our way out."
The Neimoidian didn't respond, handing the sabers to a subordinate and then gesturing for the two teenage Jedi to follow. The trip through the curving corridors and internal tram-system was quick. In no time at all, both Jedi were shown into an empty room.
"The boss will be with you shortly," the Neimoidian said gruffly, the door closing behind him.
Kani reached into one sleeve of her Jedi robe and procured a lightshoto. "Here, Fearless Leader. It's why I always have a backup. For some reason, everyone expects a Jedi to just carry one lightsaber."
"Don't you have two of these," Ben chuckled, accepting the saber. "So wouldn't this make it the backup's backup?"
"You laugh now," Kani smirked, but her entire body was tight as a wire, their nerves making them extra alert.
"How old do you think that Neimoidian was?" Ben asked, walking around the oval conference table.
"Ancient," Kani said, shaking her head. "And stressed like heck. I actually feel sorry for him. To be that old and to still have to act as some thug's enforcer."
"No kidding," Ben nodded with a sigh. "This galaxy definitely isn't..." He trailed off, sensing the Force warn him of an imminent danger. He heard a low hiss, and suddenly began to feel lightheaded, and he

cursed. "So much for a peaceful negotiation. They're venting the air supply to the room."
Kani moved to the door panel, but shook her head. "They cut the power to the console."
Ben pulled out his borrowed lightshoto at the same time as Kani, and they both began to cut into the door. Fortunately it wasn't military grade, and the meter and a half of durasteel gave way to the twin blue blades slicing through it.
On the plus side, they were no longer in danger of suffocating in the room.
On the down side, the moment the door had fallen away, a storm of blasterbolts greeted the two of them.
"Extremely pissed off at the moment," Kani blew a strand of blond hair out of her eyes as she deftly deflected a volley of blaster bolts back at their senders.
"That makes two of us," Ben grumbled.
The deafening volley ended only a few seconds later, the dozen guards that had been shooting at them down from their own reflected blasterbolts. Kani and Ben paid no attention to them and instead raced through the hallway of the massive freighter with the Force augmenting their speed.
The corridors were packed to the brim with supply-crates and other objects, used as living areas by some onboard the overloaded ship. It made maneuvering hard, but it also made attacking them just as hard. Another flurry of blaster bolts greeted them at the next juncture, a mix of droids and living guards. The two blue lightshoto pinged repeatedly, mere blurs to the average being as they spun and flashed with every bolt blocked. Kani held out one hand and threw two of the security droids into the living guards. Ben sent a light-fixture tumbling from above onto another group. And the two Jedi were off once more.
After blowing through another two guard units on their way to the bridge, the rest seemed to realize that it was probably not that smart to be in their way.
But as the Jedi neared the bridge, they encountered one last group of guards. This one was different from the last. There were four of them—three bipedal droids with glowing red eyes and sparking electrostaffs, and a lone Besalisk with vibroswords in each arm.
"This is as far as you go, kids," the Besalisk said evenly. "These IG 190s are more than a match for you, and I've fought in both the Vong and Bug Wars. Even beat a Vong commander in armed combat. Put down your weapons, and you won't get hurt."

"Funny, we were about to say the same to you," Ben remarked. "Do you truly want to be the guy history remembers as the supporter of a bunch of honorless idiots who got themselves killed because they didn't want to talk?"
"They're paying me well," the Besalisk shrugs. "I figure, by the time history remembers me, I'll be long dead so I wouldn't care."
"The Galactic Alliance can pay you better," Ben tried a different track.
"Is that so?"
"Uh huh. In fact, the planets we're restoring can use someone of your experience and skill to help keep them safe. Rather than work for the Sunfire Federation and be their lackey, why don't you sign up with Governor Nugget? You get a permanent source of income and the respect of everyone else you're helping to protect. Don't tell me the bigwigs actually respect you?" Kani said with a winning smile.
The Besalisk blinked his beady eyes several times, then shrugged and sheathed his vibroblades. "Fine. But you better make good on what you've promised. I'm taking a ship to Formos, do what you want here."
"The droids?"
"Controlled from inside the bridge," the Besalisk said, waving a hand. "They're your problem."
"Thanks," Ben called out after his retreating form.
Evidently, the controller inside the bridge had realized what the Besalisk had done, as the three IG-100 series droids whirled into action.
"Look out!" Ben yelled to Kani, giving her a Force-shove out of the way as an electrostaff nearly skewered her.
Kani turned her shove into a roll, springing up onto her feet in time to block another electrostaf blow. Ben, for his part, was having trouble warding off the spinning, piston-powered strikes of his opponent, each blow tiring his arms out at an alarming rate.
Both shoto-using Jedi were having problems as the electrostaffs gave the more agile and flexible droids an advantage in reach and leverage. Offense was out of the question. They were rapidly being worn down, sweat pouring from their forehead as they struggled to even keep up some semblance of defense.
"We need a new plan," a panting Kani managed, her back pressed against his as the trio of droids circled them.
"Agreed," Ben said. "Any ideas?"
"One, can you buy me a minute or so?"
"Against three Jedi-killing robots, I can try," Ben breathed out.

"On my go then," Kani deactivated her lightshoto and knelt down onto her knees. Placing her hands into her lap and sitting on the backs of her legs, she closed her eyes. "Go."
Ben used the Force to send two of the droids staggering backwards. The third charged at him, and he sidestepped, gripped the staff just above the mechanic hands, and used his saber to remove the droid's arms. It retaliated by head-butting him, nearly knocking him out from the impact.
"Ouch," Ben muttered, jamming the electrostaff back into its owner and sending it flying down the hallway with another push. The other two droids hurried back into the fight, and Ben hazarded a glance over to Kani. He nearly did a double-take at her almost translucent figure, realizing that she was engaged in a Flow-Walk. "Nice."
The two remaining droids worked in tandem, their staffs jabbing and whirling at the young Jedi Knight. Ben's full focus went into enduring the onslaught, even as his biceps and forearms screamed from the repeated shockwaves coursing through him with each impact. He was forced down onto one knee as the droids hammered apart his defense. The only bright side was that the droids were ignoring Kani completely, classifying her as a non-threat due to her lack of hostility and active weapon.
It was a mistake the droids didn't get to correct. Kani's eyes snapped open, glowing a slight purple for a fraction of a second, before she moved in a blur of her own, lightshoto activating. The droids lashed out behind them without even looking, but Kani—as if she had expected it—slid under their attack and batted aside both staffs with her weapon. The droids recovered quickly, but again, as if she had already seen how the fight would play out, she avoided their next few attacks with ease. One of the droids overextended after misjudging where Kani would go, and was promptly split in two. The moment that droid was down, Kani deactivated her lightsaber even as the third droid moved to attack her from behind. The third droid's blow never landed. Ben's lightshoto intercepted it and then he promptly removed the droid's head.
"Might want to stab the chest too," Kani said lazily, not even looking over her shoulder.
Ben, who was just about to walk up to Kani, spun around as the headless droid rose back to its feet. With an annoyed roll of his eyes, he jabbed his saber into the processor in the center of the droid, and it went down for good.
"That was a nice work out," Ben said. "Maybe we should bring one or two back so we can actually train to fight things other than remotes."

"We kind of made a mess of these ones," Kani agreed. They walked up to the bridge door, which had its blast doors activated.
With a sigh, they both gazed directly into the security camera and held up their lightshotos. Another second passed, and the doors slid open.
"They're learning," Ben remarked wryly.
The teens strode into the bridge, sensing the fear and anxiety radiate from everyone in the room.
"Executive Adjunct Halfer," Ben recognized the man's goatee and pony-tailed hairdo.
"President Seve," Kani noted the other individual of importance on the bridge.
They were the only two in the flesh, but a dozen other 'leaders' looked on through a Holo-comm relay.
"Now Jedi," Rale Halfer held out his hands. "This was nothing personal you know. Strictly business. And you Jedi are really bad for business."
"Uh huh," Ben said dryly. "So, you want to try that whole 'negotiating' thing again, without trying to kill us this time? We really don't want any more people dead."
Both Rale and President Seve glanced to each other, then to the holo-images of the other leaders of their alliance.
"Well…" Rale looked as if he had swallowed a bitter fruit. "I think an arrangement could be met."
[-III-]
Vestara knew things were going too well as her team reached the bridge of the Star Destroyer with no resistance. The Force had kept them invisible to most of the crew they passed, but even then she was a little disappointed that there had been no issues. The other teams were reporting in as scheduled, with Vran's group taking over the main security center and Ahri's group taking the engine room. Marjaak's group was in the power and life-support center, preparing to unleash havoc on the unsuspecting crew.
Yet, stepping through the threshold, why did she feel something was off?
Her question was answered a few seconds later when she realized that the bridge itself was devoid of crew. Devoid of crew but not of people. There were two figures standing at the opposite end of the walkway, both in 'I am Jedi' robes. One had the same height and build as Vran, the other smaller in stature. But surrounding these two figures were a dozen others. Despite the differences in styles from what the records on Kesh had recorded, Vestara easily recognized the T-shaped visors.
"Mandalorians," Saber Anyul commented aloud.
"And Jedi," Saber Reg'ceul added.

"Working together," Saber Rashima said incredulously. "The times must definitely have changed."
Vestara tuned her compatriots out and eyed the opposing group. Though she had five Sabers and four Tyros with her, something told her that any fighting would be costly.
"Who's your leader?" the mountain of a Jedi asked, stepping forward.
Vestara raised an eyebrow and mimicked his actions. "I am. Saber Vestara Khai of the Tribe, daughter of Gavar and Lahka, arm of the Council of Lords."
"Jedi Master Doran Sarkin-Tainer, wanderer, tinkerer, and busybody," Doran answered calmly. "Can I assume you intend to take this ship?"
"You assume correctly. Now will you leave, or shall we fight?"
"*Vod*," one of the Mandalorians spoke up. "You can understand what this *dar'Jetii* is saying?"
"It's a variant of an ancient dialect of Basic," Doran answered back. "The Force helps make the meaning clear. Also helps that Kyrelle and I have heard our fair share of ancient datacrystals and holocrons."
"I am curious," Vestara spoke again. "How is it that Mandalorians and Jedi are allied?"
"And *I'm* curious," Doran raised an eyebrow at her. "As to why you would ask that."
Vestara mentally berated herself and pulled her lightsaber free. "Never mind. Leave this ship or we will cut you down where you stand."
"I'll make a deal with you, Saber Khai," Doran said evenly, hands out to his side in a nonthreatening gesture. "I'm well aware that there are over thirty of you swarming around this ship as we speak. That you're probably very capable of killing the hundreds aboard this ship. Now, I doubt you want any of those thirty killed, just as I don't want any more of the crew harmed. You let everyone else leave this ship with their lives, and in turn, you get to keep it."
"Just like that?" Vestara said in disbelief.
"Just like that," Doran nodded. "Your guys live, my guys live. You get a ship, I get to brag about saving the lives of everyone else. You're a Sith, not a murderer. The two don't go hand-in-hand."
"We should just slay them, Saber Khai," Reg'ceul hissed. "Mandalorian or not, there are still only two Jedi."
"I'll accept your offer," Vestara answered, ignoring her compatriot. The Jedi was right, she grimaced at that though, she only killed for necessity. If they could take the ship without killing, then all the better.
"Saber Khai, they are *Jedi*, we cannot let them leave alive," Anyul protested.
"I'll accept it, on one condition."

"Yes?"
"You and your apprentice stay."
"You let everyone evacuate, have your people kill no one else, and we will," Doran inclined his head.
"*Saber Khai, we are in position, do we have permission to vent the ship?*"
Vestara jerked slightly at the voice coming through the comm. Then, another voice filtered into her mind.
They are Jedi. They are not to leave this ship alive.
Ship, this is my decision.
You are deciding the fate of the Sith in a moment of weakness. See where the Jedi compassion has gotten them? With but a word, you can vent the ship, annihilate all witnesses.
The Jedi are already aware of our presence.
They mistake us for the One Sith. Kill these two and that illusion will be maintained.
We are not murderers.
No, but you are Sith. It is your sworn duty to destroy the Jedi. Just as it is my sworn duty to ensure the Sith rise once more.
Then, to Vestara's horror, she could feel Ship take control of her voice.
"Vent it, Vran."
Alarm sirens went off throughout the ship, the heavy doors to the bridge slamming close as airlocks all over the vessel were opened. Those in the hangar bay never stood a chance as it was instantly vented with no warning whatsoever. Deaths by the hundred were felt in the Force, the bodies of ejected crewmembers being expelled from every opening on the ship. The alarms blared for several loud minutes, before all was quiet and the doors to the bridge opened once more.
"Master," Vestara heard the female Jedi say, the confusion in her voice obvious.
"I felt it too," Doran said mutedly. He addressed his next question to Vestara. "That was your meditation sphere I gather? First time seeing it in action like that. I guess all those stories about it having a mind of its own were true."
Vestara took a few moments to control herself, seething rage and hatred at what the Ship had forced her to do bubbling to the surface. It was clear she had no choice now. She had killed everyone else on the Star Destroyer, the Jedi would never let her or her people go in peace now. Her hand gripped the hilt of her lightsaber.
"The ship is yours," Doran said, his calm statement startling Vestara. "However, since you vented everyone else, my apprentice and I will be leaving."

"What?"
Doran shook his head. "Saving the crew was always a long-shot. When you Sith set your mind on killing, very little stops you, even death. I just wanted to see the type of dark Jedi this sector has been dealing with. You know, whether you were the megalomaniac-take-over-the-galaxy type, brooding-hating-the-galaxy type, or something else. I got my answer. This ship isn't worth losing any more lives over, not your people, or my own."
"You seriously think we'll just let you leave?" Vestara asked, feeling both Vran's and Marjaak's group near.
"How many of your people are you willing to lose trying to take down my apprentice and I?" Doran asked, his voice still maddeningly calm. "Sacrificing your people for a goal, that's not your style, is it? And last time I checked, you said *you* were the leader of your group. You have your ship, really want to be greedy and go for it all?"
Vestara's hand twitched, but she didn't move. She could feel the eyes of the other Tribe-members boring into her back.
"You are Jedi."
"Yes."
"We can't let you go."
"I'm sorry you feel that way," Doran tilted his head slightly. He reached into his robes and pulled out a small device. "There are currently mines placed along every single bridge window and under the ship's main reactors. Unless you want to reduce this fine ship into a drafty, floating piece of scrap, I'd think long and hard about your next course of action."
The others had arrived in time to hear Doran's ultimatum. Unfortunately, several of the newer Tribe-members from Kesh were chomping at the bit for their first bloodletting outside of their homeworld. Letting out angry snarls, they vaulted over the other members of the Tribe in an attempt to engage the two Jedi.
And they were promptly sliced in tiny pieces by micron-thin wiring stretched out in a web between the Jedi and Tribe members by the Jedi's Mandalorian allies.
"Look before you leap, *dar'jetii*. He did say to think about your next action," a female Mandalorian commented in mild disapproval.
"Jedi dogs," Vran growled.
"You see, now he was the type of dark Jedi I was expecting," Doran gestured to Vran as he addressed all the other Tribe-members. "Fortunately for you all, *she* is in charge and not him."

An enraged shout followed that, and the Force ripped the razor-wire from its fastenings and hurled the ball of sharp nearly invisible metal at the Jedi and Mandalorians as if it were a cannon ball.
Doran made a gesture and the ball was redirected into a nearby wall, where it embedded itself with a thud. Another two of the muscular tribe members stomped forward with the intent to teach the Jedi a lesson. Then promptly had their legs blown off by camouflaged mines placed just under the flooring.
"Mandos, five. *Dar'jetii,* zero," one of the other Mandalorians drawled.
"Etain. They get their strength from their rage and hatred, please don't give them more fuel," Doran said to the Mandalorian.
"But I wanna see them hit my traps next," the Mandalorian all but whined. "I mean, there have to be more stupid ones among that group, right?"
"You slime-ridden filth!" Another Tribe-member roared at the dismissive way the Mandalorian and Jedi were talking. He and two others edged forward carefully, using the Force to ping their surroundings.
"Oh, good, they still had stupid *dar'jetii* left over." The Mandalorian pressed a button on her gauntlet. The fire-suppression system in the ceiling activated, but instead of retardant, some sort of jelly-like fluid flowed out and covered the three dark Jedi. Said Tribe-members suddenly found themselves immobilized, completely bewildered at their inability to sense the threat. Legs stuck to the deck plating, arms trapped in place by the living jelly, the trio never stood a chance as the Mandalorian drew her side-arm and promptly scored three head-shots.
"Eight to zero," Doran said, looking resigned. "Your move, Saber Khai."
"We will let you withdraw," Vestara spoke up before any more of her fellow Tribe-members could do something to further embarrass the Tribe.
"Thank you," Doran tilted his head in polite acknowledgment. He then glanced over to the Mandalorians. "Dinua, get your people off first. Have fun breaking in those new *beskar'gam* armor sets?"
"Still a *dikut,*" another female Mandalorian shook her head. "Let's go, *vode*. Doran still has *Jetii* business to deal with, we've done our part."
The Mandalorians clustered in the airlock closest to the bridge, then ejected themselves into space. One of the freighters accompanying the Aduba battle group moved up alongside the floating Mandos and took them in. The Jedi Master then gestured for his apprentice to follow, and she pulled out some sort of organic mask that adhered to her face. Rather than follow his apprentice out the airlock, however, Doran gave her a jaunty wave, then activated the airlock cycle. Then, surprising all

the Tribe-members, he proceeded to jam his lightsaber into the control console. After he did so, however, he grimaced, as if sensing something through the Force.
"Love you too, Kyrelle," Doran muttered, rubbing at the center of his forehead. Sheathing his lightsaber, he gave the stunned Tribe-members a smile. "Sorry, I changed my mind at the last second. I guess I'll stay after all."
Vestara said the first thing that came to her mind. "Are you insane?"
"Would any of you get angry if I quote part of the Jedi code to you?"
"No," Vestara said.
"Yes," Vran said at the same time.
"Oh, okay. Because Muscles over there said it so forcefully. There's no ignorance, only knowledge. I believe that holds true for both Sith and Jedi, right? Don't know how much the Meditation Sphere has taught you about the Jedi Order these days, but more info can never hurt."
"Information for your life?" Vestara asked.
"Something like that," Doran shrugged. "Something tells me that knowledge is something you'll need a lot of to pull off whatever plan you have. There is strength in knowledge, and Sith are all about strength."
Vestara weighted his words carefully, wary of a trap or deceit. Being raised on Kesh, it was almost second nature for her to accept the extended hand of friendship and look for the *parang* in the other. But she sensed nothing like that from the Jedi in front of her. In fact, he wasn't even bothering to shield his intentions. He had hoped to learn as much from them as he had to offer. Truly wanted to see why her group was doing as they did.
He was self assured, boarding on cocky. But he was also strong in his own right, possessed a strength that Vestara hadn't seen on Kesh before. After all, who else would willingly surrender to an enemy when they had had a way out? Stupidity or strength?
"We should…"
"Shut up, Vran," Vestara barked. "Ship placed me in charge. The Circle of Lords sanctified me as the leader of the endeavor. My way has gotten us this far. Far enough that the Circle has placed even more under my command. Question me in public again and I will send you back to…home."
The Jedi stayed quiet. Then, one of the panels behind him began to flash.
"Oh, the comm-system. That call is probably for me, do you mind?" Doran asked.
Vestara blinked her silent consent.

Doran activated the device and immediately the image of his apprentice appeared. "*ARE YOU BRAIN DEAD, MASTER! WHAT TYPE OF IDIOTIC IMPULSE DECIDED TO TAKE YOU THIS TIME!*"
Doran gave her a friendly wave. "Kyrelle, can you have the Mandos and the rest of the Aduba Security peoples continue on to Formos? They'll definitely need the support. Don't worry. I'm perfectly fine over here. The muscle-bound Sith who want to kill me are currently exercising the few brain cells they have realizing my value as an intelligence source."
"*'Intelligence' source is debatable,"* Kyrelle glared. "*And being surrounded by Sith who just mass-murdered the entire crew is so definitely a reason to worry!*"
"What's Dinua saying?"
"*Learned a few new Mando'a swear words*," Kyrelle said darkly.
"Hey," Doran's voice changed slightly to a softer, more caring tone. "I'll be fine, promise."
Kyrelle just gave him one more glare, then deactivated the comm. A few minutes later, and the Mandalorian freighter and the other ships in the fleet all jumped to hyperspace.
Doran spun back to the others. "So, given that I just sent my ride away, I really hope I can stay."
Vestara felt the rest of her attack force join them on the bridge. Nearly forty Sith against the singular Jedi Master. They were all staring at her through similar black masks, their expressions and faces hidden away. The cold wall of emotionless followers made Vestara feel very isolated. She fought back the feeling and decided to defy Ship and the impulses of the others. "You can stay."
"Thank you, Saber Khai. Shall I walk myself to the brig?"
"Please do so," Vestara nodded. "Saber Rejik, make sure he makes it there."
"Yes, Saber Khai." The Jedi went with Rejik without any problem.
Once gone, Vestara addressed the others. "Everyone else, get this ship moving again. Link up with the other vessels. We have achieved our goals. It is time we returned ho…"
"There is one more thing that must be done," this time it was Saber Kaara who spoke.
"There is?"
"The Skywalker Jedi. If he is so important, we must kill him. The High Lord will never approve if we let such a potential enemy live."
The other murmured or indicated an agreement. Vestara knew she had used up a lot of her 'leadership' capital accepting the Jedi, also saw the wisdom in neutralizing the future threat. "True. Saber Anyul, take this

ship and all the others back to the tribe. I will not risk losing any more of the Tribe's ships or best fighters. As we all have heard from Kaara, there are only three combat-capable child-Jedi opposing us. I'll lead a small group to neutralize them."
Nods of approval were seen among the masked crowd.
Vestara let out a slow breath. It was decided then, she was going to go Jedi hunting.
[-IV-]
Ben could only groan as he returned to the waking world. His nap doing little to dispel the weariness only a ten-hour long negotiation could create. On one hand, he knew he had done the right thing. On the other, things would have been so much easier if he had just offed the despots and their friends. Not offing them meant that the billion lives they controlled would continue to live in abysmal conditions for a little longer. But it also meant that those billion lives had security, stability, and order regardless of how restrictive their freedom was. Governor Nugget had been right, these strongmen had held together these disparate populations for over ten years with dwindling resources and hope. His head still hurt thinking about the pros and cons of the deal that had been made.
"Trying to sleep here, Skywalker," Kani disgruntledly muttered from his side.
He absently rubbed her back, trying to comfort himself with the very 'Jedi' solution that had been agreed upon so no one would blast each other into pieces. It didn't sit well with him, but at the same time had been what the situation needed.
The said despots and strongmen were all going to get their own planet…eventually. Of the six being restored, all the protesting despotic factions would be settled on one. But it would not be the planet of their choosing, nor would they be allowed to settle until the other factions voted on settled first. They also had to let a certain number of their population leave to join other factions.
The last stipulation had been harder to get through, but the strongmen and despots were certainly not going to pass up the sure chance of a planet over a few hundred thousand people. The choosing would be done by lottery, with guarantees that there would be no repercussions for anyone participating or again voiding the deal. Barely sixteen years old and there was so much riding on his every choice and word.
Ben grimaced as a pillow landed on his face. "Sorry, sorry."
"Too late," Kani grumbled, turning and rubbing her eyes. "It's what I get for being best friends with a galactic hero."
The door to their quarters slid open. "Hey Ben, guess…oh…."

"Blast it, Chatterbox! Have you heard of knocking!" Kani gestured, pulling the covers up, and sending the pillow on Ben's face rocketing off and into Josat.
"Sorry," Josat said contritely.
"What is it?" Ben sighed. Kani pushed herself back against his side and drew his Force presence around her like an insulating blanket, set on falling asleep again.
"Sorry," Josat repeated in a quieter voice. "Just wanted to tell you that the vote was held."
"What?"
"You two have been asleep for a day and a half," Josat said hesitantly. Seemingly torn from continuing his report from the doorway and stepping into the room.
"Why didn't you wake me earlier!" Ben said, prevented from getting up by his best friend who was using him as a pillow.
Josat tilted his head back slightly. "Doctors order, Fearless Leader. You've been burning yourself at both ends, last thing we all need is for you to mess up because of a lack of sleep. Billions of lives do depend on you you know."
"Thanks, I never knew that," Ben said flatly.
"Anyways, Governor Nugget, Furball, Fishsticks and I all oversaw the vote. It was a resounding success if the turnout was anything to go by. Even the Sunfire people and the other factions allowed their people to participate. The first groups selected are already beginning the process of moving down on Formos by the seeders. The leaders of the other factions wanted to thank you for your support. They've seen the work Master Shaper Paasar has done and have promised to support and protect his shapers when we leave. They're setting up a big ceremony back down on Formos in your honor."
"Today?"
"In an hour actually. Normally I'd let you sleep in some more, but reach out with the Force, Fearless Leader. Hope. You can actually sense it now. Two months ago you couldn't even see a glimmer of that, but hope is everywhere. In the ring of ships, on this planet, heck even the Aduba people are looking forward to this to-do."
"Alright, Alright." Ben let out a sigh. Even as he said it, he could definitely feel the shift in the Force Josat had mentioned. The dark cloud that had permeated the Formos system appeared to be lifting, the refugees realizing that their lives were going to be better—even if it might take a few more months of floating around in their ships.
"Fine. I'll be up in a little bit."

"Right…then….leaving…" Josat backed away and the door slid shut in his absence.
"Gotta go smile for the camera's Kani," he murmured, absently brushing a lock of golden hair out of her face.
Kani pouted, but rolled away to allow him to get out of their shared bunk. When he stepped out, she immediately rolled into the slight impression his body had left. "Have fun."
"Can't tell if it was sarcasm or not."
"Too tired to be sarcastic. Go, look pretty for the holo-cams."
Having slept in only his underclothing, Ben grabbed the pile of Jedi robes and boots and took it into the refresher with him. His face was showing several days worth of red stubble, his eyes looking tired despite the almost two days of sleep he had gotten. Deciding that a shave was needed, he splashed cool water on his face and prepared to meet the rest of the day. He took care of his business and emerged from the refresher not exactly feeling awake, but not feeling dead either.
Kani was waiting for him, her Jedi robes slung over her shoulder and boots in one hand. "Took you long enough."
"I thought you weren't a holo-cam person." Ben joked as she hurried into the refresher and closed the door behind her.
"Shut up," Kani's muffled voice sounded.
"Think you can be ready in half-hour, or should we tell the governor to delay things?"
"Josat has to know by now that it takes a while for us girls to get ready," Kani said unhappily. "If I'm going to have my face pasted across the local Holo-Nets, I am so not going out there with bed-head."
"Nice to see you act like…" Ben decided to stop.
"Like what?" Kani asked back.
"Like a girl," Ben grimaced.
"Boink yourself on your head for me," Kani called back. "And seriously, where do you keep your comb in here?"
"I don't need one. Naturally curly red hair."
"Of course," he heard Kani sigh as if not having a comb ready for her was *his* fault. The faucet turned on, ran for a bit, then off. He heard the blow-dryer, heard several drawers open and close. "Towels?"
"Same place the last time you were in there."
"Found them."
Ben sighed, taking a nearby seat and idly continuing his reflections on his first official mission as a Jedi Knight. He wouldn't say that it was going as planned, that it had gone without a hitch, or that he considered it a resounding success. But on the plus side, he hadn't

fallen on his face or induced the Starhoppers to declare war on the Galactic Alliance.
The refresher door opened, and Kani emerged in her Jedi robes.
"How do I look?"
"Like you usually do?" Ben blinked.
Kani rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Never mind."
"Errr…." Ben tried.
But she put a finger to his lips. "Don't worry about it, Fearless Leader. We have a party to get to, so lets get going."
Awaiting them in the hangar of Governor Nugget's starport were their other friends. Ben gave them a two-fingered wave as he and Kani stepped off the boarding ramp. "Hey guys. Sorry to keep you all waiting."
"Not a problem," Jun said. "If anyone needs rest it's you and Kani."
"Hey, the three of you have been working overtime too," Ben clapped a hand on his shoulder, shaking his head. "In fact, I doubt I could have held this place together without your guys' help."
"And it was your fearless leading that made us useful," Cappricia said. "I know I'm pretty much useless outside a library, but these past few months have been a real blast."
"Altogether, not a bad start, Jedi Knight Skywalker," Kani smiled up at her best friend.
Ben smiled sheepishly and nodded.
Josat gestured. "Okay, let's go. Governor Nugget's sent a speeder for us."
The changes Formos had undergone in the nearly three-months since the terraforming had begun were nothing short of miraculous. Where before the scenery had been a depressing rock-filled desert with an almost acidic-yellow sky, the planet had become something more. Everything from the sky to the soil was changing at Yuuzhan Vong-enhanced speed, the Shapers utilizing lessons they had learned from life on Zonama to accelerate the drastic shift the planet was undergoing.
There were patches of blue interspersed amid splotches of yellow in the sky. Clouds that had once been gray and menacing were white and fluffy, several induced planetary-wide rainfalls clearing out the particulate matter and depositing freshly released minerals and enzymes to the ground. Rather than dry and sandy, the air had a crisp, almost fresh-plant smell, the breeze no longer feeling as if it was coming from an oven or a blast-chiller.
The ground composition itself had changed completely from the planet-wide shaping. No longer a fallow, inhospitable, heterogeneous

mixture of jagged rocks and dust, the yellows and tans that had once dominated the planet were being supplanted by browns and reds. The nutrient-rich rainfalls continued to deposit the necessary minerals and enzymes which broke down and mingled with the existing elementary composition of Formos' ground. The rainfalls even carried with them a vast variety of seeds and genetic material conducive to starting life on the planet.

Even as the speeder left the starport, Ben could see fields of grass, of developing shrubs and trees, sprouting up all around. The harsh sunlight above was muted by an enhanced ozone layer, again attributed to the Life-Seeders. He hadn't fully had a chance to appreciate all the changes, what with him buried in one refugee problem or another, so he literally was seeing this change first hand. And his jaw was dropped wide open as he did. There were all sorts of stories told by veterans of the Yuuzhan Vong War of the biological prowess of the Yuuzhan Vong race. But normally those were in reference to some atrocity or act of destruction; the surge coral used on prisoners, the destruction of Sernpidal; Voxyn and shaped Rodians to name a few. Rarely did anyone stop to consider what the Yuuzhan Vong could accomplish with their biological expertise if that knowledge was used for *good*. And Ben was now gazing at the results.

Despite all the pressure, the stress, the ups and downs of the past few months, just looking at the difference was enough to cause a lump to get stuck in the back of his throat.

"It's amazing," Cappricia voiced, her yellow eyes alight. "Do you think the Shapers will put in an ocean or lake so we can go swimming too?"

"Fishsticks, I think oceans are the last thing they want to worry about right now," Jun said dryly. "Besides, where are they going to get all the water?"

"They were pretty good at causing all those rainstorms," Josat backed up the Melodie. "Maybe they can cause this giant localized rainstorm over one of the main craters on this planet. Name it after us. The Kick-Butt Team of Jedi Who Gave Us This Planet Lake."

"I highly doubt it," Ben chuckled, even though the idea, and not the actual name, did have a certain appeal to it. "So where is this ceremony taking place?"

"Not sure exactly," Josat held up a datapad. "Governor Nugget said to meet us by the Life Seeder in quadrant Xesh Three."

"Xesh Three," Ben mentally reviewed the map of the planet as they grew closer. "Isn't that a crater?"

"I think so," Jun confirmed.

The pleasant trip across the flat terrain was quick. The Jedi soon saw the gathered crowd of tens of thousands standing amidst a collection of hastily erected structures. The emotions of peace, of joy, of genuine pleasure, of hope and thankfulness washed over the Jedi in a wave. The crowd themselves saw the Jedi approach and a great cheer sounded.
The Jedi decided to get out of their speeder. Overwhelmed by the masses, but this time for a good reason. They couldn't help but smile smiles that stretched their faces almost painfully as they took in all the grinning people and waving hands in the mid-day sun.
"Now *this* is why I'm a Jedi," Josat grinned, striding tall. "Damn it feels good."
"Definitely seconded," Kani agreed, giving Cappricia a one-armed hug as the jubilation got to her as well.
"*Skywalker! Skywalker!"*
"Jedi! Jedi!"
Cheers mingled and competed as the Jedi shook hands, nodded to various people, and even signed pieces of flimsiplast. They were definitely given the royal treatment as the masses pressed in around them to personally thank them, or even to get a glimpse at the person who had returned life back to the barren world. Eventually, the two Jedi made their way up to a stage that sat at the rim of a crater.
Or what was once a crater.
"No way," Josat's jaw dropped. "I was joking."
"They actually made a lake," Cappricia blinked, stunned. Indeed, the crater was filled with sparkling clear water that placidly lapped against the sides, a walkway cut a few meters below the rim encircling the entire depression.
"Welcome, Jedi Skywalker and friends," Governor Nugget chuckled, for once not dressed in his heavy-armor and plethora of blasters.
"Thank you," Ben tilted his head. Then, in a lower voice. "Are the Shapers here too? They deserve as much credit, perhaps even more, for making this planet livable."
"Eeeh, you sure you want to risk it?" Nugget said warily. "I mean, it's easy for this lot to cheer you. You're human, a Skywalker, a Jedi. The Vong…"
"They should be here," Ben nodded.
"Your ceremony," Nugget sighed. "Stand here, smile, wave. I'll get my boys to bring 'em over."
Ben and friends did just that, the crowd roaring in approval as the teenagers stared out at them.
"Wow," Cappricia beamed. "Wow."

"I was thinking that," Jun breathed out in wonder.
A shuttle flew by overhead and stopped a little off to the side of the stage. The Yuuzhan Vong Shapers of Domain Paasar emerged, looking both cautious and confused.
"You sent for us, Jedi Skywalker?" Master Shaper Aeri asked.
"Yes," Ben nodded, making a deliberate show of clasping the Shaper's hand and giving him a welcoming hug. "This celebration should be for you and your people as well."
The cheering quieted slightly at that, but Ben gestured, and the Shapers joined his friends on the stage.
"Well, yes," Nugget addressed the crowd, the microphone picking up his voice. "I think we're all here to make sure that the kids who've worked so hard to save our collective rears know just how appreciative we are of their work, am I right?"
The cheering rose again, cries of 'Jedi' and 'Skywalker' again sounding out. Nugget waved at them, and then handed Ben the microphone.
"Huh?"
"Your show, kid," the Lepi said, taking a step back.
Ben blinked wildly, the chants cheering both him and his friends on growing in volume. He exhaled shakily, forcing a smile to his face.
"Wow, thanks, everyone." Cheers greeted that simple statement. "To be honest, my team of Jedi haven't done much. The ones who really did all the hard work, who made the change to this planet in the first place are standing with me. Master Shaper Aeri Paasar and his team have worked tirelessly these past few months and are truly deserving of praise."
The cheers died away once more, an unsteadily silence washing over the crowd. Just when Ben was about to forge ahead, a group of people began to shout out a new chant.
"*Yuuzhan Vong! Yuuzhan Vong! Yuuzhan Vong!"*
The chant was picked up by others, rippling outwards like an ocean wave amidst the crowd of hundreds of thousands of people.
Ben let out a breath of relief, the Shapers next to him seem completely bewildered, and the rest of Ben's friends just rolled their eyes at their fearless leader.
"See what happens when everyone works together?" Ben called out as the cheering became a dull roar. "Not just Jedi, not just everyday people, not just Yuuzhan Vong, but *all* of us! This is what we can achieve when we put our hearts and minds to it. When we reject despair, fear, and hatred and band together to truly make something grand. This isn't a day for myself and my friends, or for the Yuuzhan Vong who have done more than their share in this endeavor. This is a

day for all of us. A day of celebration for the return of life, of laughter, of hope. Decades from now, this will be seen as the rebirth of this sector, and it is thanks to every one of you, here and on the ships above, that it was possible."
"*Ben! Ben! Ben!*"
"*Jedi!"*
"*Yuuzhan Vong!*"
Nugget chuckled at the frenzied crowd. "Kid, I truly think they believe you're some sort of god."
"Last thing I want is a statue or something," Ben said in embarrassment.
"Is that how you really feel?" Nugget's eyebrows twitched.
"You're kidding," Ben blinked.
Nugget gestured to the far side of the crater. Carved into the side of the basin was a niche of some sort, a towering statue tucked within.
"Please tell me you're kidding," Ben repeated.
"Sorry," Nugget chuckled. "Part of the ceremony was the official dedication of the statue to those who made this planet's revival possible. Let me show you kids what it looks like."
Several holocam droids emerged out from the crowd and followed the group of young Jedi, Yuuzhan Vong, and Nugget around the edge of the artificial lake. Giant flat-screens set up for the massive crowd allowed them to see the wonderstruck expressions of the young teens in clear detail.
Standing at a little over three meters high and carved into the very side of the crater, the almost obsidian statue had the young Jedi staring at it in awe. Crafted with extreme detail and realism, there was little doubt as to the time and effort it had taken to make the statue. There were two primary figures standing back to back, three smaller figures standing in the forefront. The five were in a protective stance around an artistic representation of the Formos system in the form of concentric circles carved into the ground.
Of the central figures, one was a traditional, hooded, Jedi Knight, both hands clasping a saber and thrusting it upwards into the sky. The Jedi Knight's tunic was partially open from the action, revealing a muscular chest to go with his well defined arms. His chiseled face was that of a generic Jedi, yet still bore a strong resemblance to Ben, and was staring out across the lake back in the direction of the crowd with resolute determination.
Standing at his back, one knee slightly bent, and staring in the same direction was a hooded female Jedi Knight carved in a similar, stylized eroticism, her saber held in a guard position. Strands of hair peeked

out of the hood in an imaginary wind. Her tight Jedi robes were cut short, revealing a toned, muscular stomach, her lower tunic formed around muscular thighs almost like a second skin. Despite appearing like a fully grown, well developed woman, her 'generic' face also had a strong likeness to Kani.
"Wow," the blonde Jedi apprentice whispered in amazement, staring at the male half of the statue.
"Yeah, definitely," Ben agreed, his eyes locked on the opposite figure.
"The masons and craftsmen on many of the ships up there decided to team up," Nugget said with a smirk. "Wanted to thank you the only way they knew. Nearly a thousand plus worked on this thing while you guys were out saving the sector."
"I really look like this?" Josat was glancing at his 'double.'
Josat's figure was also in a hooded Jedi tunic, but had been tailored for his role as a healer. Rather than a combat pose, he had has arms outstretched in front of him, palms turned upwards. Some sort of crystal was embedded into the palm of each of his hands and was catching the sunlight in a way that made his hands glow a brilliant white. Again, 'his' figure had an aged face that could have been any other Jedi if Josat hadn't been standing right next to it.
"Look at the detail on this fur," Jun said in disbelief, his head shaking back and forth slowly as he ran a hand over the 'generic' Cathar Jedi statue. His statue was the middle of the three 'smaller' statues, and actually the first one saw when entering the sheltered niche. There was an almost untamed, wild look to the Jedi warrior, fangs bared and fur puffed out slightly as if the statue was about to lunge. Holding a saberstaff, the Cathar Jedi was in a wide stance, his saber held perpendicular to his body. There was no mistaking his role as the 'guard' of the enclave, the one everyone had to get through before reaching the other statues inside.
Cappricia was giggling slightly at hers. "So this is what I'd look like if I don't become a fish, huh."
"Looking sharp, Fishsticks," Kani giggled with her. The Melodie's 'statue' was that of another hooded female Jedi, a book in one hand and an outstretched saber being pointed with the other. Though in full robes, the 'cloth' wrapped around every curve, enhancing various attributes of the female Jedi in the same hyper-real eroticism of the other statues.
"Hottest looking Jedi Archivist ever," Josat blinked in amazement, before his mind caught up with his mouth.
"Thanks," Cappricia blushed.
"You kids like it I guess," Nugget commented, smiling.

"We love it!' They practically blurted in unison.
Ben glanced at the hovering armada of cameras. "Really, all of you. This is too much. Thank you, seriously. We Jedi don't ever expect anything in return so when something like this happens…it just affirms to us that we're doing the right thing."
The cheers that went up from the distant crowd let the Jedi know how their acceptance had been received.
"What about the Yuuzhan Vong?" Josat asked, using the Force to direct his whisper to only those present.
"The cheer earlier was enough," the Master Shaper said reassuringly. "I do not think the Yuuzhan Vong people have been cheered like that, ever. It is of great honor to us that Domain Paasar was the first."
"Are you sure?" Cappricia asked.
"Very," Aeri noted. "Enjoy these accolades, *Jeedai*. They are well deserved."
"It looks like things are going to end happily out here," Jun grinned, patting a leg of his statue. "Congratulations, Fearless Leader. Mission accomp…."
Jun stopped, the shift in the Force like a lightning bolt through a dry tree. The other Jedi felt it as well.
"It's not over yet." Ben cursed. He began sprinting back towards the cheering crowd.
"What's the plan?" Kani breathed, keeping stride.
Again the well-wishers tried to reach out to the Jedi rushing by them. This time, however, the young Jedi pushed through the crowd in a frantic dash.
"Get as far away from this crowd as possible," Ben panted. "I don't want any collateral damage."
"What about Master Sarkin-Tainer and his apprentice?" Josat spoke up. "Fishsticks?"
"I haven't heard anything from them," Cappricia shook her head in negative.
"Then we're on our own again," Ben said. They skidded to a halt at their speeder. "Cappricia, you and Josat can…"
"We're coming with you," Cappricia said determinedly. "We're a team, right?"
"What she said," Josat added.
"Guys…"
"We're coming," Josat repeated, a rare hint of heat flashing in his eyes. "Cassa will kill me if you get killed."
"Then don't get me killed and you should be fine," Josat quipped, climbing into the speeder.

The others piled into the speeder after him, and Ben punched the accelerator. He could feel the threat closing in and swore once more. His mind raced for a solution. His group had barely survived last time, but that was because the Sith hadn't been ready, hadn't been looking for them.
Now, however, was different.
He could sense the intentions in the Force, sense the desires of the dark Jedi.
They were coming, and there was no mistaking what they wanted to do.
A shadow flew by overhead, barely obscured by the clouds above, and a freighter made a sharp descent and landed in a patchy mixture of sandy desert and loamy soil.
Time was up.
The airlock cycled, and one by one, dark-robed, masked individuals stepped out.
Ben killed the engine of the speeder, and the young Jedi piled out as well.
The whooshing snap-hiss of lightsabers accompanied the movement of the Jedi as red and purple blades flared to life on the opposite side.
Yes, there was no mistaking it. The Sith were back.
[-Chapter End-]

Chapter Five
[-I-]
The sun blazed above, white clouds floating peacefully through the patchwork blue and yellow sky. A cool breeze washed through the flat landscape, refreshing in any other situation but the one the young Jedi now found themselves in. They were outmatched, could feel it in every cell of their body. Where Jedi were trained to defend, to deescalate conflicts and, in this day and age, block blaster bolts, the trio before them appeared razor-focused and intent on ending their lives.
"Three of them versus five of us," Josat exhaled, gripping his shaking hand with his other. "Not bad odds, right?"
"Only three of us can actually fight," Cappricia chastised her friend, her face pale, yellow eyes wide with fear as she hazarded another glance at the dark Jedi.
"Good point," Josat muttered. "Let's go stand behind the speeder and brush up on our cheerleading routines."
"The giant muscle guy is here," Kani swallowed, gesturing with a tilt of her head. "He would have killed me on Formos Besh if that other ship hadn't come in when it did."

"That Lightning Force-user is here too," Ben pointed out the female Sith he had faced previously. "And I think that other dark Jedi girl is their leader. She was the one who ordered them back on the ship."
"Rematch," Josat said weakly.
"Hope not," Kani muttered. She could sense Ben draw on their bond to reinforce his nerves, and did the same, weakly smiling at her best friend in silent acknowledgment. "We barely survived the last encounter. Both Muscles and Lightning *Schutta* are Jedi Knight level at least. And that's just those two. If that other girl is their leader, we're toast."
The wind blew a tumbleweed between the two groups as they squared off, fluttering Jedi and Tribe robes indiscriminately.
The leader of the dark Jedi surprised everyone by stepping forward and deactivating her lightsaber. She made a gesture and the two with her followed suit. In a voice that could be heard across the gap between the groups, she called out. "I would speak with the one called Jedi Skywalker!"
"Ben," Kani said anxiously, placing a hand out to bar his path as he began to step forward.
"I'll be okay," Ben muttered, stepping forward again. The rocky ground crunched under his Jedi boots, sounding overly loud in the dead silence that followed.
Kani clenched her jaw and glared at the dark Jedi who had called Ben out, daring the other woman to pull some dirty trick. Swallowing, and against her better judgment, Kani nodded curtly, stepping to the side to let him pass.
Ben Skywalker advanced slowly, unhurriedly. He was in no rush to begin the dangerous saber swinging and dismemberment that usually accompanied a lightsaber battle. His heart thumped loudly in his chest, his blue eyes evaluating the trio before him. His Force senses weren't telling him a single thing about the wall of black-clad dark Jedi other than the fact that they all wanted him and his friends dead. Not exactly reassuring.
Leaving a few steps between himself and the petite girl who had called him out, he tilted his head in greeting. "I'm Jedi Knight Ben Skywalker, of the Jedi Order."
"I know," the smaller female dark Jedi said. She was about Kani's height and had her same athletic build—if the form-fitting black jumpsuit she wore was anything to go by. A brief moment of silence, as if the dark Jedi was considering something. Then, she reached up and removed her mask.

Ben felt his mouth dry and his jaw drop at the pale face that now stared back at him. When one thought of dark Jedi, one normally thought about wrinkled, old, dark-sided corrupted visages that reflected the corrupt internal nature of a person. But this dark Jedi was nothing like he thought.
Simply put, she was beautiful. Light brown hair framed an unblemished face that gazed at him with deep brown eyes in guarded curiosity. Rather than corrupt or make her appear sickly, the dark side that shrouded her gave her an almost boundless vitality with aspects of strength and desire. The geometric tattoos that covered her face only added to her mysterious, exotic nature, emphasizing the soft angles of her face. She was also around his age, which definitely surprised him. How she had come to lead the dark Jedi was yet another question that popped into his mind. Still staring, he saw her lips twitch in amusement and he immediately closed his mouth and blushed crimson.
"Errr…you do?" Ben said intelligently.
"Your name has continued to pop up as of late. Apparently you are the key to this sector's success."
Ben briefly realized that he had barely understood a single word the teen before him had said. The language she was speaking was ancient in nature, something he had only heard from the old holovids the archaeologist dug out of the Ossus Library. He frowned. Why would a dark Jedi be speaking with such an archaic dialect? It was just one of the many questions he had. Starting with the identity of the deadly beauty before him. "Then can I know your name, please?"
"Sith Saber Vestara Khai," she said calmly. She held out a hand. "I will make you an offer, Ben Skywalker. Come with me and I will spare your friends. Resist and they will die alongside you."
Ben looked at her in confusion. Did she really think he'd agree to that? "Why in the world would I go with you?"
She paused for a moment, eyes narrowing slightly. She started to say something, stopped herself, and instead leaned forward, her lips brushing by his cheek as she breathed against his ear. "Because, I assure you, coming with me will be so much more….pleasurable. As Sith and Jedi, we're on opposite sides, enemies even. But we don't have to hate each other-that's a choice we make ourselves. Aren't you even a little curious as to what I can offer you? "
Ben felt dizzy, and desperately tried to reign in his emotions. Even the dark Jedi's scent was intoxicating, the feel of her palm right over his pounding heart, warm and distracting. He absently wondered if she was using some sort of Force technique and tried to focus on

something other than her. He barely marshaled the will to do so. "And my friends? I highly doubt you'll keep your word. Too many witnesses."
Vestara, still pressed against him, her breath on his ear, inclined her head slightly. "True, there is that."
Ben felt a flash of anger and the Force pulsate in warning a microsecond before Vestara's saber was pressed against his stomach and activated. At such close range it was impossible for him to dodge or defend against it. He jerked, grimacing as he felt the blade burn into him. Staring up at Vestara's face, he raised an eyebrow. Surprisingly, there was no hatred or murderous rage. Almost, what seemed like disappointment.
There were startled yells and cries by his friends as the dark Jedi's purple saber lit up the patch of dead ground Ben and Vestara were standing in. Lightsabers flared to life once more in deadly concert, the glowing blades momentarily mesmerizing both sides as they waited for the other to make the next move.
"Ben!" Kani's hoarse scream of rage and fear broke the spell. She vaulted from where she was, both blue lightshoto flashing in the sunlight.
She was met mid-air by Vran, his hammer-like attack with his own red blade sending Kani rocketing back to the ground at high speed. She impacted hard, a small cloud of dust thrown into the air as she painfully rolled several meters, before coming to a groaning stop.
"Kani!" she vaguely Cappricia's yell.
Kani weakly opened her eyes, which widened even further when she saw Vran's hulking form plummet from the sky directly above her. She summoned enough strength to fire off a blast of Force energy, barely redirecting his attack in time. Vran recovered fast, stabbing at the ground several times. She swiveled her hips, kicking at his knees and causing them to temporarily buckle. Scrambling back to her feet, Kani cast a desperate glance back towards Ben. That cost her, as Vran delivered a vicious backhand which knocked her to the ground and had her seeing stars. He gave her no reprieve, however, as he grabbed her by her hair to haul her back up to her feet. Dazed, she didn't even have a chance to block his next blow to her face, the solid punch sending her falling backwards, consciousness threatening to leave her. Self-preservation and her worry for Ben, however, kept her awake. Bloodied, hurting, Kani saw her weapons on the ground a little distance away. When Vran moved to collect her again, she summoned a lightshoto into one hand and drove it into his foot. Needless to say, Vran did not appreciate the amputation of several toes. Kani didn't give him a chance to retaliate, rolling and slicing at the heel of his

other leg, cutting through the tendons he needed to move his good foot. Unfortunately, Kani had never faced a full blown Sith before, and the rage and pain she was inflicting only served to enhance Vran's strength.
Jun, in the meantime, had activated his saberstaff and tried to charge in, only to be rebuffed by a blast of lightning from Kaara. He blocked the first one-handed blast of lightning. But when Kaara added a second handful of lightning, Jun was literally thrown backwards by the sheer force of the attack. Kaara leaped high and landed in a patch of dusty ground, the air displacing all around her. She performed a spinning kick which impacted with one of Jun's wrist, causing him to loosen his grip on his lightsaber. Another spinning kick caught the side of his head, staggering him. And then a blast of Force lightning at point-blank range slammed into his chest. Fortunately, the Yuuzhan Vong symbiote was immune to Force attacks, and the moment of surprise was all Jun needed to put some distance between them. He slammed his hand into the exposed stomach of the dark Jedi, then swept her legs with a swirling kick. While she fell, he hit her again, but this time with a blast of Force energy that sent her flying and tumbling across rocky ground. Exhausted, Jun used what time he had to try and regain as much strength as he could. He knew he was going to need every joule of energy if he was going to survive.
Ben Skywalker held Vestara's chocolate gaze, the purple of her lightsaber illuminating both their faces. He gripped both her hands, clasped around her lightsaber, with both of his. Mentally thanking the Force that he had inherited his grandfather's ability to absorb energy as well. "That wasn't very nice."
She gave him a grin, then head-butted him, and pulled away, swirling into a fighting position he hadn't seen before. Vestara winked almost playfully and then placed her mask back on. "I was beginning to worry that the stories of your prowess were exaggerated."
"I aim to please." Ben noted, his saber flying to his hand and flaring to life.
Vestara's purple blade flashed against his green in lightning succession. Ben found himself on his back-foot as her strikes and slashes flowed outwards in an almost ceaseless, seamless barrage. Her combat style, obviously meant for fighting another saber-user, was clearly more efficient than his on-the-fly try-not-to-die stance.
"Then again, I could be mistaken," Vestara said coolly, giving him a moment's reprieve. She let her saber twirl around in her hand as they circled each other, the other fights seemingly far away as they focused

on each other and the buzzing of their blades. "Your combat technique is like a bumbling Shumshur."
"Sorry, not used to lightsaber users trying to kill me," Ben said.
"Better get used to it then," Vestara answered back, darting back in with the same agility and speed as before.
Not as before, Ben mentally corrected. Much faster this time. His eyes rapidly tried to keep up with Vestara's flourishing strikes, only to realize that the flourishes were a distraction. He let out a hiss as a curved, bladed weapon flashed from her opposite hand and sliced deeply into his right bicep.
Almost in instinct, he thrust out his hand and Vestara was slammed hard with a freight-train of Force energy that threw her backwards. She turned her backwards momentum into a roll though, and sprang back up to her feet. Only to have Ben ram his larger form into hers in a shoulder tackle that sent both of them sprawling across the patchy dirt ground. He recovered first, her surprise at his physical attack still working against her as he rolled on top of her and pinned her to the ground.
"Had enough?" Ben panted, pinning her arms above her head with one hand. He did his best to ignore the increasingly soaked sleeve coming from the laceration on his arm. Life and death situations did wonders for the adrenaline flowing through him.
Her eyes glinted at him through the slat in her mask. "Just getting warmed up. I hope you haven't reached *your* limit."
She gestured with her head, and the glass blade trapped in her hand flew out and shot at Ben like a rocket. Ben was forced to release her hands to avoid the projectile, and Vestara took full advantage of that. Though he was still straddling her, with her arms free, Vestara lashed out at his injured shoulder with several rapid punches. The pain that flashed through him caused him to yell out and fall backwards and off her. The dark Jedi swiveled her hips, and he barely avoided a follow up kick. But he did, and at the same time, unleashed a kick of his own that caught the bottom of her masked face. The attack, enhanced with the Force, caused the material of the mask to shatter, and part of the mouth-guard to cut deeply into Vestara's lower lip.
They both rolled away from each other, panting, bleeding. Still on all fours, both held out their hands and their lightsabers returned to their owners. Cautiously, they watched each other as they returned to their feet. Ben saw a bloody grin on the exposed jaw of his opponent and shook his head in disbelief. He couldn't believe she was actually having fun!

Then, he felt sheer pain flash through his Force bond and heard a bone-chilling screech. He immediately looked towards Kani, eyes widening at the sight. The larger dark Jedi was holding a bloody-faced Kani in a crushing bear-hug of an embrace, at the same time sending tendrils of lightning with his hands directly into her spine. Kani was twitching, screaming in agony and desperately trying to use their bond to alleviate the pain as she tried to escape. Another spike of pain, and Ben saw Jun on the ground in a similar predicament, the dark Jedi he had faced on Formos Besh delivering a literal storm of lightning to the thrashing Cathar.
"You put up a good fight," Vestara said softly, wiping some of her blood away and removing her damaged mask.
Ben vaguely registered that she was standing right behind him, but he couldn't summon the energy to care. The pain rippling through his bond was almost crippling. "Make them stop." He breathed out, gaze focused on Kani's convulsing body.
"Why?"
"Stop them!" Ben yelled, spinning to the dark Jedi as panic built. He could feel Kani fading and that was something he was *not* going to let happen. "Now!"
To the surprise of all those present, he held out his hand and suddenly Vestara was lifted into the air. Her hands flew to her throat at the crushing pressure applied, her saber falling to the ground as the Force made breathing all but impossible. Ben glared at her, breathing heavily in fearful desperation. "Stop them, now! Stop them! Make them stop, blast you!"
A blast of Force Lightning from the side of the large dark Jedi slammed into Ben and knocked him to the ground. His every nerve ending screamed in protest as the barrage continued. The pain only doubled as the dark Jedi fighting Jun turned her own lightning onto him. His body spasmed and convulsed, the agony blinding him to everything else as he twisted about on the ground like a fish out of water.
"Stop it!"
To Ben's great relief, the lightning stopped. He weakly turned his head to see who had spoken, then paled as he saw a trembling Cappricia holding out her yellow saber before her. Her hands shook as she took another step towards the trio of dark Jedi, but she held her chin high.
"I won't let you hurt them anymore," Cappricia said, her voice firm despite the trembling in her limbs and petrified expression on her face.
"Let us?" the large dark Jedi chuckled disdainfully. He lazily fired off a blast of lightning.

Cappricia squeezed her eyes shut and blocked it with her lightsaber. Then her eyes opened in surprise at her successful defense.
"Amusing," the female dark Jedi Lightning-user commented in a bored tone. She fired off a blast of her own.
This time Cappricia yelped as her lightsaber was blown out of her hands.
"Cappricia, just get out of here," Ben rasped, his body helplessly limp on the ground.
Even without her lightsaber, the Melodie straightened and shook her head, continuing her advance. "No. I never abandon my friends. Not to the wild beasts on Yavin Eight, and not to dark Jedi."
"Saber Khai?" the other female dark Jedi looked to their leader.
"Take care of her, Kaara," Vestara consented, looking on at the Jedi teen almost pityingly.
"No," Ben breathed out in a pained breath, weakly pulling himself across the ground in a vain attempt to stop the dark Jedi from killing his friend.
Kaara sprinted towards Cappricia with her saber active, intent on running the teen through. Then, to the surprise of everyone else, appeared to run headlong into an invisible wall that had materialized in front of the cringing Melodie. Kaara collapsed to the ground, more stunned than hurt. The other dark Jedi looked to the caster of the wall.
"Got us the time we needed, Fishsticks, thanks," Josat said, emerging from behind the speeder.
"Happy to be bait," Cappricia said faintly, her trembling legs giving out as she sat down.
The larger dark Jedi fired lightning at Josat, but Josat dove to the side with a yelp. He got back to his feet, brushing off his robes and looking at the dark Jedi incredulously.
"Okay, you so need anger-management classes or something. That was really rude. Anyways, you dark Jedi have two choices," Josat said. "Get back into your ship and return to wherever you came from. Or meet a not so pleasant end in the next couple of seconds."
The larger Jedi snorted. "You and what army, puny Jedi?"
Josat held his hands out to his sides, mimicking the pose of his statue. "This one."
Almost on cue, dozens of ships began descending through the clouds above; those that landed offloading soldiers from the various factions in orbit. Others still circled above the clearing, gun turrets and other weaponry aimed planet-ward. More ships arrived, armed speeders with cannons mounted on the back zooming out to join the rapidly assembling taskforce.

The sounds of guns charging, of being primed or cocked, and the heavy footfall of booted feet echoed all around.
The three dark Jedi seemed absolutely bewildered by the arrival. As if hardly believing that anyone without the Force would dare stand up against them.
Josat offered them a vicious smile, waving a comlink at them. "Meet the United Armed Forces of the Formos System. It was nice of you to give all those squabbling factions a common enemy. They like beating each other up and got really offended when you guys started to do that for them. You guys may be good, but do you really think you can block hundreds of blaster bolts and slugs thrown at you all at once?"
Vestara just chuckled. "No. But they will not last long against the power of the Force."
Two beams of light lanced down from the sky, blasting into the ground in a circular pattern all around the trio of dark Jedi. Those nearest were incinerated instantly, the ships clipped by the energy beams blown from the sky. The spherical shape of the Sith Meditation Sphere blew through a ship in its path, coming in like a wrecking ball. It stopped amid the hovering ships and performed three-hundred and sixty degree spin, its dual energy anti-matter cannons eviscerating the hodgepodge group of vessels surrounding it.
Its ramp opened up, and the three dark Jedi leaped up into the ship before the ground defenders could recover from their shock. The ramp closed, the other ships in the region opening fire on it. But its shields held as it burned jets and took off through the atmosphere.
For his part, Ben could only groan, flopping back over onto his back. He glanced over to his friends and saw that both Jun and Kani were unconscious. They were alive though, and that was definitely more than what he had hoped. He made a mental note to get Cassa a very big thank you present for forcing him to take Josat along. Despite his talkative nature and avoidance for knocking before entering his room, Chatterbox had definitely proven his worth.
"Thanks, had a lot of fun too," Josat said, skidding to a halt next to him and breaking open a healing kit.
"Help Kani and Josat first," Ben tried to push his hands away.
"The dark Jedi chick cut the artery on your arm you idiot," Josat bopped him on the head. "Fortunately for you, the Sith Lightning cauterized it, but I need to treat it."
"The others," Ben again protested.
Josat just sighed. "Sorry, Fearless Leader, doctor's orders. When you wake up, everything will be just fine."

Before Ben could protest any further, he felt Josat's warm hand on his sweaty forehead. A split second later, Ben was fast asleep, his last thoughts being of Vestara Khai and the dark Jedi they had just barely managed to survive.

[-II-]

Vestara stared at herself in the mirror of her family's estate on Kesh, frowning at what she saw. The fragmentation of her mask had left a deep cut in her lower lip. Deep enough to leave a permanent scar. The Tribe prided itself on physical beauty, on perfection, on the assembly of genes to create a 'perfect' Sith. The disfigured, the crippled, the mentally ill, were all relegated to menial chores, to the lowest rungs of Keshiri society. By Keshiri standards, Vestara knew that her flawless complexion, abilities, and figure made her very desirable among those her age. Knew that Ahri felt desire towards her on several levels, even if she didn't reciprocate those feelings. But in the span of a single battle, that flawlessness had been marred.

She stared at her reflection long and hard, hands gripping the basin of the sink as she recalled the Jedi who had inflicted such a socially devastating wound.

Jedi Knight Ben Skywalker. His name escaped her lips in a soft whisper. It had been a full month of hyperspace travel, a month plus the three days she'd spent on Kesh, since she had last seen the Jedi Knight who had occupied much of her thoughts.

He had been a lot younger than she would have thought. But she couldn't deny that he also had a certain, physical appeal to him. His blue eyes had shown with an innocence she hadn't recalled seeing in a very long time. His confidence in the abilities of himself and his friends enhanced his natural power and the resolute aura that seemed to have surrounded him. He had entered the battle fully knowing that he and his friends were outmatched. But had done so because he had also known the fight was inevitable. Rather than try to run from it, he had turned and stood his ground. That type of strength and confidence had thrilled Vestara in a way she didn't think possible.

Standing in front of the freighter, seeing Ben Skywalker in the flesh for the first time, Vestara couldn't help but feel her heart skip a beat. He was attractive in that forbidden sense, his features definitely in line with what Kesh would consider 'acceptable'. Piercing blue eyes stared across the patchwork land of grass, soil, and sand. Red curly hair fluttering in the slight breeze. He was standing at the forefront of his little group of Jedi, obviously intending to protect them.

Vestara's eyes narrowed at the way the blonde Jedi girl stood by his side, could sense the deep bond between the two without even trying.

The first order of business, weaken the enemy by dividing them. She called out the Jedi Knight's name, smirking behind her mask when the blonde Jedi girl temporarily stopped his approach.
Oh she was going to have so much fun getting into blondie's head.
Ben Skywalker bravely answered her call, and she stepped out to meet him in turn. Up close, she could smell the natural fragrances of whatever soap he had used to shower, could sense his power-restrained for some reason—lurking just beneath the surface.
Deciding to do him the courtesy of revealing her face, Vestara took off her mask. She was more than pleased by his reaction, equal parts surprise and desire at once. Looking over Ben's shoulder, she was even further gladdened by the way the blonde Jedi in the distance tightened her grips on her lightshoto and took an abortive step forward.
Seeing Ben looking her over, Vestara decided to take the opportunity to do the same. Slender, yet fit, he stood only a head taller than her. His face and broad torso that of a fully mature male human. Unlike Vran or Ahri, Ben Skywalker apparently did not feel the need to work-out to develop his musculature. But at the same time was athletic in build and—from his wary stance—seemed more than competent in the saber-handling department.
Vestara suddenly had an urge not to kill this Jedi specimen before her, but to turn him to her side. With the strength she sensed in him, he would be a powerful ally she could use to resurrect a new Sith Empire. She threw out her initial impulse to challenge him to a duel to the death, inviting him to surrender to her. Even going so far as to promise the safety of his younger friends. When he protested, questioned why he would go with her, Vestara felt slightly insulted. Could he not see the opportunity he was giving him?
She glanced over his shoulder again at the blonde Jedi, and saw her glaring daggers right at her. She smirked slightly, deciding to toy with Ben's female friend by stepping close to him and placing a hand on his chest. She wasn't sure what his relationship to the blonde Jedi was, but took a small amount of satisfaction by the near apocalyptic look the female Jedi sent her way.
She whispered into Ben's ear, half acting, half truly meaning her words. She truly did have so much to offer him if he agreed to join her, if he agreed to surrender completely to her will. Not only was he physically appealing, but the unassisted capture of a Jedi Knight would be a crowning achievement of her mission, would definitely advance her status among the Keshiri.
Then his emotional barriers slammed shut, rebuffing her. Shock of that occurring was accompanied by rage as he questioned her word,

questioned her very honor. She was in no way like Vran or the other Tribe-members who would say one thing but then stab the other in the back at the first opportunity. In a place where status determined everything, her honor was one of the things she valued most. And this boy of a Jedi, who had never even met or known her, questioned that? Fury coursing through her, yet shielded by her uncaring persona, she let her lightsaber stealthily return to her hand. Murmuring her reply into his ear, Vestara activated her saber. She fully expected him to die, to fall over in uncomprehending shock. When she felt her saber make contact with his body, a flash of disappointment flickered across her face. Maybe his pretty looks were just that, looks. Maybe this Jedi wasn't all that special after all. But then he made her day by negating the energy of her saber with a Force technique she wasn't familiar with. That strength she sensed bubbling under his placid exterior rising to the surface for a fraction of a second.
She was vaguely aware of both Vran and Kaara engaging two of the other Jedi, but instead focused on Ben.
"That wasn't very nice," he said, his voice almost teasing to her ears. Vestara felt her adrenaline spike. Maybe she'd get to see what this Jedi was made of after all. She pulled her mask down over her face, and engaged him with everything she had. Again, this man-boy of a Jedi Knight confused her, his saber work sloppy and definitely amateur in nature. How did someone like him become a Knight if he didn't even know the basic dueling forms that was drilled into all Tyros starting at their initiation?
Vestara smiled at her reflection, but the stitched up wound on her lip made the smile look more like a smirk. She had definitely underestimated Skywalker. She would readily admit that. When he had kicked her in the face, she had been more than surprised. Hand-to-hand combat was a requirement for all Tyros, they even had to kill one of Kesh's many animal predators bare-handed to be considered for the rank of Saber. She just never expected a Jedi to use such brutish tactics in a fight. He surprised her further with that Force Choke. It was then, even as she struggled to breathe, that she had become determined to turn him over to the dark side.
She remembered, after Vran and Kaara had intervened and blasted Ben with lightning, standing above the fallen Jedi, lit lightsaber in hand. While Vran and Kaara amused themselves with the other teenage girl among the Jedi's ranks, she had been left alone with Ben. All she had to do was plunge her glowing saber down into him and his life would be over. But as she held her saber over him, as she gazed down on his writhing body, she found herself incapable of acting. She had seen how

loyal his friends were to him, how they had stood by his side despite the fact that they would most likely die. And that loyalty, that trust, it was something she desperately wanted. Would desperately need if she were to restart the Sith Empire in the image she desired. So she let him live. Let him live and took the risk of exposing the entire Tribe; all because of her selfish whim.

Her return had been heralded as an unmitigated success. Already Keshiri engineers and factories were churning out reverse engineered versions of the tech that had been captured, even going so far as to create their own versions. Hyperdrives, once a pipedream due to the loss of knowledge, were once again reality. Interstellar travel, turbolaser technology, everything that had been lost since the time of the crash now on the table once more. The mountains of Kesh had more than enough raw materials, and mining was kicked into overdrive to meet the demand.

Using schematics which had survived the test of time, Keshiri engineers hybridized the captured technology with the millennia-old designs with amazing results. *Blade*-class starfighers were made for the first time since the fall of Naga Sadow, with upgraded weaponry and shields, and even hyperdrives of their own. There were even three dreadnaughts—made in the Lanvarok-shape of the *Omen* itself, but augmented with technological improvements found on the captured Star Destroyer—in production. All of Kesh—from the lowly servants to the Tyros, Sabers, and Lords and Ladies—was gearing up to that eventual date where they'd make their return to the greater galaxy.

The doorbell chimed, stirring Vestara from her thoughts. Vestara heard one of the servants let in whoever was calling. She could tell right away who it was. She pulled on a simple robe to cover herself, cinching it shut with the cloth belt, and moved to meet the arrival.

"Tyro Raas," Vestara greeted neutrally at the top of a grand stairwell.

"Ves," Ahri, dressed in a traditional bare-chested Keshiri tunic that showed off his pectorals, looked up at her. "Soon I will be a Tyro no longer."

"No longer afraid of the High Lord's blade?" Vestara asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Not nearly," Ahri ascended the stairs and took up a position next to her, observing the servants below going about their business. "Your success has undermined much of his influence and power. Capturing a Jedi Master alive in addition to all of the ships was something those in the Circle of Lords could not even have imagined possible for you. Lady Rhea is reaping the benefits as those in the Circle seek to gain her favor."

"And this has to do with you entering the trials for Saber?"
"I spoke with Master Xal, and he has agreed that if you were able to complete it in three year's time, I should be able to do the same."
"I'll be sure to send flowers to your family, as well as money for a gravemarker for when you fail."
"Turnabout is fair play," Ahri chuckled. "I remember you, Saber Khai, when you decided to enter the trials. I asked why you would do something so crazy when you were only twelve. You remember what you told me?"
Vestara nodded, fingers absently tapping the banister. "'The quicker I become a Saber, the sooner I can attain the rank of Sith Master. The sooner I can shape the galaxy into one of my liking.'"
"Yes," Ahri breathed out. "I sometimes wonder if that ambition is why Ship chose you. But then, I realized that if ambition alone were the sole criteria, there would have been so many others as well. Everyone here on Kesh aspires to be something more than they are. Even the High Lord. Heck, even that Jedi Master you brought whose probably wishing he never came."
"You came by here for reasons other than to brag about your foolish attempt to become a Saber," Vestara redirected.
"I did," Ahri ran a hand through his hair. "Look, I know we didn't always see eye to eye on the mission. But we are entitled to our own opinions, right?"
"The point, Ahri," Vestara drawled, watching the serving staff below dutifully clean the entryway.
Ahri shifted slightly, his red eyes glancing towards her almost nervously. "Wanted to know if you were free to walk around the Ragnos Lakes with me. Today's supposed to be the first time in a century that the algae will glow twelve different colors over the entire expanse."
"Like a date?" Vestara said, mildly surprised and turning to give him her full attention.
"Wouldn't go that far," Ahri quickly said, shaking his head emphatically. "A walk shared with a friend. Been a while since we just hung out."
Vestara opened her mouth to answer, as she did the image of Ben Skywalker's handsome feature popped up. She closed her mouth, looking away from Ahri and schooling her face into a neutral expression one once more. "Just a walk between friends?"
Ahri nodded, his expression not changing as he too studiously looked away from her. "Of course. Our masters would kill us if we tried to start anything."

"No kidding. I don't think Lady Rhea thinks all that highly of Master Xal."
"And the feeling is definitely mutual," Ahri chuckled. "I can't tell whether they hate each other's guts or just can't find the courage to marry each other."
"Ahri, that is not an image I want in my head the next time I see her," Vestara complained with a groan.
"So," Ahri looked back at her nervously. "You free?"
Vestara let out a small laugh. Ben Skywalker was lightyears away, would stay that way until the Tribe was ready to return to the galaxy. Though she didn't exactly trust Ahri, she knew he would never betray her. At least not without warning her first. As far as suitors go, she could do a whole lot worse. Giving him a ghost of a smile, she inclined her head. "Why not? It's been a while since I relaxed."
"Great, see you in a little bit, Ves."
Vestara just chuckled once more, running a hand through her hair. Ahri had been right about one thing. Since her return she had begun to receive all sorts of requests to weigh in on one policy issue or another. Her victory had brought her family prestige, honor, and most importantly, power. The High Lord was trying his best to minimize these accolades, but when a pure Sith artifact chooses someone, then that someone successfully leads a team on a mission no one expected to succeed, things kind of develop naturally. The Ship had told her to enjoy her success, to wait again for the next moment to act. And that is what Vestara intended to do.
She had gained the recognition she had sought. Was slowly getting into a position to help her people emerge from the stagnant planet of Kesh and back into the stars. Her, fifteen year old Sith Saber Vestara Khai. It might not be any time soon, years even. But she knew that when Ship called on her once more, she'd be ready.
[-III-]
From waking up nice and comfy with his childhood best friend in his bunk aboard the *Dawn* to waking up to a sterile-smelling room full of beeping machinery and uniform decorations, Ben mentally reviewed what he should do to never wake up in the latter again. Then again, he *was* a Jedi, and no one could officially call themselves a Jedi if they didn't end up in the med-bay at least once after a dangerous mission.
"Ossus medbay?" He asked, recognizing the sterile white and gray surroundings and closing his eyes again.
"Yup," the voice of Mara Jade Skywalker answered, not exactly sounding pleased.

"The others?" He could sense that they were sleeping, so he wasn't sure how badly they had been hurt.
"Nothing bacta and our best healers couldn't fix," Mara answered. "Don't mean to take away your glory, but the Solos still have you beat in terms of near-mortal injuries."
"Drat," Ben said with a weak laugh. He opened his eyes again, calling on the Force to force his stiff body into motion. Mara helped him into a seated position and adjusted the bed.
"You ruined your tattoo by the way," Mara gestured to his arm.
Ben glanced at his bicep. Bacta and Force healing had fixed up the muscles and nerves that Vestara's glass blade had created, but there was still a noticeable scar bisecting the Jedi Order emblem inked on his shoulder.
"Well, that didn't last long."
"Maybe the Force is trying to tell you not to get tattoos in the future," Mara said dryly.
"Cosmic karma?" Ben said skeptically. "More like crazy dark Jedi girl."
"Yeah, about that. Josat had a lot of explaining to do," Mara said with a snort. "You and Kani were out of commission and Cappricia was apparently too scared to remember much of what happened. I mean, not only did your group end up looking like it had gone through a meat-grinder on what was supposed to be a simple restoration project, but Jedi Knight Kyrelle Frieneil and Jedi Master Doran Sarkin-Tainer are missing too. Then that friend of Cassa's tells us this whole tale about an ancient Sith ship, armies of dark Jedi, giant honorary statue, and a giant green bunny."
"All true," Ben laughed, letting his head rest against his pillow.
"If you weren't a Skywalker I'd call you a liar," Mara rolled her eyes. "Anyways, you can imagine this isn't exactly what Chief of State Hamner had in mind when he sent you out. The fact that some lucky holocam crew managed to snap several shots of you, Kani, and Jun lying on the ground on Formos 'near death,' didn't help any. Director of Galactic Alliance Intelligence, Belindi Kalenda was forced to stepped down because of the 'debacle,' and her second-in-command, Colonel Dician was tapped to take her place."
"What's being done about those dark Jedi we faced?" Ben asked.
Mara's expression soured. "Nothing."
"Nothing!?"
"Director of the Galactic Alliance Guard Anakin Solo wanted to send a fact-finding mission out there. To try and see if the dark Jedi you faced were the same ones he and Jacen faced on that asteroid several years back. Chief of State Hamner nixed it, didn't want him wasting

resources on a wild bantha hunt. In fact, he's of the opinion that you all didn't face dark Jedi at all, but a band of Mandalorian backed-mercenaries and pirates who used hallucinogenic nerve agents when they attacked you and your friends."
"And how did he reach that conclusion?" Ben said incredulously. Not for the first time wondering why the galaxy kept electing leaders who made very questionable choices and liked to ignore hard evidence. It was no wonder the galaxy went to Kessel in a hand-basket every few years.
"Since you guys left, the Mandalorians have annexed the Formos system from the Aduba Hegemony. In fact, they're making inroads on the entire sector. The fact that Aduba has lost most of its military strength means that it can no longer keep the sector as secure. Chief of State Hamner believes the whole thing was an elaborate Mandalorian plot to take the entire sector by using proxies to destabilize it."
"Oh," Ben said, trying to wrap his mind around how anyone could come to that conclusion.
"Yup. You gave billions of people a home, restored law and order in the sector, and in the eyes of the government, your first mission was an abject failure," Mara chuckled deeply, smoothing the sheets on his bed. "You were supposed to make the Aduba people so in awe of you and your greatness that they'd flock with open arms to the Galactic Alliance. Not drive them into Mandalorian control."
"You're laughing," Ben cocked his head curiously.
Mara gave her eldest a grin. "Couldn't have been more proud of you Ben if I tried. I saw the intel you were sent out with, then heard what you had to face out there. Despite the odds, you and your entire team, including every Shaper you were sent with, made it out alive. Better yet, you've improved the lives of almost ten-billion people and gave that region of space much needed security. With the Mandos in the area, I doubt even the dark Jedi would stick around."
"That last part was completely unintentional," Ben said, blushing slightly.
Mara shook her head, still smiling. "It happened anyways, and the government is blaming your lack of experience for it, so you get the credit."
"Yippeee. Does the Chief of State have another mission lined up for me?"
"He's currently busy trying to explain how you ended up 'near-death' in a good-will restoration mission. Well, that, and trying to figure out a

way to punish the Mandalorians for their 'blatant attack' on the Galactic Alliance's Jedi ambassadors to the Aduba Hegemony."
"Good," Ben let out a sigh of relief. "I think I've had enough adventure these past few months."
"Being a Jedi Knight not what you thought it'd be?"
"Yes…no…I don't think I had any expectations. But when a simple restoration gets complicated by dark Jedi…"
"Ben, that would throw anyone for a loop," Mara said dryly. "And most people wouldn't have gotten out of it with their heads attached. Jedi haven't had to fight other Force users for over two decades now. Heck, most of the Praxeums don't teach saber-to-saber fighting as part of standard curriculum because of how rarely we go up against anyone not wielding a blaster. The fact you went up against full trained dark Jedi and lived to tell the tale…let's just say I'm thanking the Force profusely at the moment."
"So, what's next then?" Ben asked after absorbing what his mom said.
"Well, you and your friends will be resting up at Ossus for the next couple of days," Mara answered. "Prolonged exposure to Force lightning can leave permanent neural damage, so Master Cilghal and Tekli want to make sure no lasting effects remain. Relax, enjoy your victory Ben. Even if the GA government says you've failed, you pretty much upheld everything a Jedi is supposed to be out there. And most importantly, congratulations for completing your first mission. May there be many more to come."
"Thanks," Ben replied, grimacing at the thought. He and Mara both felt a slight shift in the Force, and paused their conversation as a pale and wan Kani Asari dragged herself into the room. "Hiya, Kani."
"You doing okay?" His best friend asked softly, using their bond to ascertain his status for herself.
"A little crispy, a little sore, otherwise okay," Ben answered back.
Mara smiled fondly at Kani. "I'll get out of your way, Jedi Apprentice Asari. Glad to see you're okay too."
"Thanks, Master Skywalker," Kani said. Mara left the room and Kani stiffly made her way over to Ben's medical bed. "Scoot over."
Ben did as bidden, and Kani rolled in next to him. "Comfy?"
"Much better," Kani muttered, taking one of his hands in hers.
Ben closed his eyes, letting their very powerful bond open on full so that they could reinforce the other and accelerate their recovery.
"Yeah, much."
Kani rested herself on his non-wounded side, listening to his heart beat as she basked in their combined presence. "Some adventure."
"No kidding. Going to become a Jedi Knight any time soon?"

"No way," Kani laughed, looking up at him fondly. "Maybe in a couple years. It's not a competition between us, and I'm in no rush. You have enough crazy for the both of us."
"According to mom, the mission was a complete failure."
"Meh, you're not perfect," Kani answered, as if she had expected it.
"Always can count on you to keep me grounded," Ben said dryly.
"I can fawn over you if you want."
"That'd be too weird. You're not the fawning type."
"Yeah."
The two young teens fell silent again, staring absently at the rough stone ceiling. Their thoughts returned to their 'simple' mission, their amazement that they had managed to survive it shared between the two of them. Ben in particular recalled seeing Kani in Vran's crushing hold, screaming as lightning raked her body.
"Stop," Kani muttered, squeezing his hand. "Not your fault."
"He had you in that thing for what felt like an eternity," Ben murmured.
"Not an embrace I enjoyed at all," Kani said softly. She reached up to caress his face. "But I survived it, because of you. The worst part for me was what followed."
Kani shared her own worst memory. Mentally, he saw from her perspective the sight of him thrashing as both Vran and Kaara double-blasted him with lightning. He went from choking out Vestara to convulsing in almost inhuman angles on the ground.
"That looked bad."
"Thought they were going to kill you," Kani murmured, nuzzling him. Their emotional distress being soothed by the other "Can we just agree that the two of us were way out of our league and have a long way to go before we decide to stare down dark Jedi again?"
"Agreed," Ben said, rubbing her back to comfort both her and himself.
"Can't believe Fishsticks stood up to them."
"Wouldn't have brought her along if I thought she'd be a jellyfish," Kani quipped. "We're lucky Cassa convinced you to take Josat and Jun too."
"Very. Remind me to get my cousin something nice for her next birthday."
"Will do."
Their breathing slowly even out, both emotionally drained from the ordeal. Their eyes fluttered shut as they just focused on the presence of the other.
"Hey Kani."
"Yeah?"
"I don't say it enough, but thanks for being my best friend."
"Thanks for being mine."

"We're a team forever, right?" Ben murmured, sleep fogging his mind.
"Forever." Kani confirmed softly.
And gradually, to the rhythmic beeping of the various machines in the med-bay, the two exhausted teenagers fell back to sleep.

[-IV-]

Three days later, Ben Skywalker would admit that he was bored out of his mind. There was only so much that could be done at Ossus. Then again, the political poodoo storm his first mission had caused meant that he was probably safer on Ossus—less chance of getting hit by any of the poodoo being thrown about. That still didn't alleviate his boredom. He had spent a little over three months on edge out in the fringes of space dealing with problems of all shapes and sizes. Now his main problem was doing the dishes or helping Master Solusar with a lesson for the younger Jedi. Sure he got to hang out with Kani and the others, but they were all still recovering from their ordeal and were limited as to what the healers would allow. He had had a taste of the action of the adventure and he found himself wanting just a little more danger in his life once more.

Hearing the animated voices of Josat and Cassa across the courtyard, Ben canted his head to try and overhear the conversation. From the number of Yuuzhan Vong words being used, the younger Jedi were having a conversation with the Praxeum's resident Shapers—an energetic one by the sound of things. Considering they were gesturing wildly to a bemused Jun, Ben got curious. Kani was undergoing a medical check-up by Master Tekli and wouldn't be free for another hour, so he decided to kill some time and see what the source of all the commotion was about.

"Things going okay, guys?"

The group of younger teens, consisting of Jun, Josat, Cassa, and her Twi'lek friend Jedis'sei, all jumped guiltily at his voice. The fact that the Yuuzhan Vong Shaper decided to avoid eye-contact also meant that the conversation had a more 'insane Solo/Skywalker' slant to it. Ben sighed, rubbing his face.

"Okay, Cass. Out with it."

Cassa rolled her eyes at him and placed a hand on canted hip. Ten-going-on-eleven, she had both attitude and spunk to spare. "Only discussing how to keep my favorite cousin from getting roasted by Sith Lightning the next time he's in the field. Josat and Jun both told me how when his…'lung symbiote'," She made air quotes, as if knowing the Yuuzhan Vong name for the creature attached to Jun would only confuse her older cousin. "Was hit by lightning, no damage was done to him."

"Yuuzhan Vong life aren't susceptible to direct Force techniques," Josat chimed in.
"Yeah, I was getting to that," Cassa shot back at him. "Anyways, since Yuuzhan Vong life is immune to direct Force techniques, I was trying to ask Master Shaper Zhi Yim if we could create something wearable designed specifically to combat Force-users."
"What's the problem then? I heard you arguing in Vongese."
"Major one," Josat answered. "Galactic Alliance law prevents the Yuuzhan Vong from developing any new biotech with military use. A suit of armor that can be used against Jedi would definitely fall under that category. I was telling Cass that its why such an armor hasn't been made yet. The government is wary of Yuuzhan Vong biots in general, tolerating their Shaping techniques because they're helping to repair the planets. But this, an armor suit that can make every-day people immune to Force powers. I can even imagine what the conservative Masters and Knights would say about it."
"And I told him it wouldn't even be an armor," Cassa said in exasperation. "It'd be like wearing a living shirt and pants. Blaster fire would still kill you if you got yourself shot."
"And I told her that the politicians and adults wouldn't be able to tell the difference. All they'll hear is that the Yuuzhan Vong have developed something that can allow an every-day person to negate Jedi abilities," Josat said, throwing up his hands.
Ben considered the argument for a moment, then decided he really had nothing much to lose. "If Master Shaper Zhi Yim creates a set of Yuuzhan Vong clothes, do you think I can model it?"
Cassa let out a squealing giggle of happiness as she promptly hugged him. "Knew you were my favorite cousin!"
Ben just laughed. "Hey, all I'm doing is wardrobe shopping right? No one has to mention the 'a-word' right? If there's an added benefit of protecting me from that random bolt of lightning, even better."
"There's a downside to that too," Jedis'sei sighed, her red lekku rippling in the Ossus sunlight.
"Yeah?"
Jun, sitting next to her, nodded. "Omega Blue is common knowledge in the galaxy since the True Victory Party posted the formula onto the HoloNet. I hear there's even a market for Omega Blue in a spray-able can."
Josat nodded. "That's the other big problem. Most Yuuzhan Vong wearable biots bond to their wearer. Whether its amphistaffs or even their coralskippers."

"*Yorik-et,*" Cassa and Jedis'sei corrected, sharing a small grin with the other.
"Yeah, that. If you happen to be wearing a very fashionable Yuuzhan Vong set of clothing and are sprayed with Omega Blue, chances are that your set of clothing will kill you along with itself to try and stay alive."
"The baffor grenades used by our side during the war are an example," Jun said. "The vonduun armor killed the one wearing it when it died."
"Any chance we can take out that vulnerability?" Ben looked to the others.
"That vulnerability is what makes Yuuzhan Vong life invisible to the basic spectrum of the Force," Josat shook his head.
"So I can wear a nifty new Yuuzhan Vong shirt, probably making myself immune to Force attacks. But if I'm hit with Omega Blue while wearing my new clothes, I'll probably die?"
"Hence the continued argument," Josat said before Cassa could get a word in. "I get to play Emperor's advocate to all of her crazy ideas, and she gets to try to find away to stump Jun and me."
"Your solution to the Omega Blue thing then?" Ben looked to his younger cousin.
Cassa scowled slightly, looking away. "I haven't thought of anything yet. I was going to ask my dad the next time he stopped by."
"Master Shaper, do you have an opinion?" Ben asked, noticing the elderly Yuuzhan Vong Shaper had been silently listening the entire time.
"I would not wish to put you in a difficult position Jedi Knight Skywalker."
"It's Ben!" Ben groaned. "Just 'Ben'."
"Good luck with that," Cassa said with a small smile. "They don't bow to me, but I can't avoid the honorific 'Daughter of the Yun'o's Chosen'."
The Shaper looked to the young Jedi for a long moment. "There is a possibility to accomplish what you wish, without the negative you have thought of."
"There is?" Josat and Cassa said in unison, blinking.
The Master Shaper shifted uncomfortably. "It will not be entirely legal according to Galactic Alliance Law, nor will we be able to advertise it once it works."
"We can always shelve it if it's too illegal," Jun shrugged.
"As you mentioned, this Omega Blue's formula was put on the HoloNet for all to see. All including the Yuuzhan Vong."
Ben blinked very slowly, his mind arriving to the same conclusion as the others. "You found a way to neutralize Omega Blue."

The Master Shaper nodded once. "Yes. To simplify the biological component, we insert another gene into the genetic makeup of the life we are Shaping. This, in effect, kills the organic component of Omega Blue and its subsidiaries, rendering it ineffective."
"How do you know of this?" Josat said in a hushed whisper. "I mean, have you guys actually tested…"
The Master Shaper looked to Cassa. "Three years ago, the Avatar of Yun-Shuno herself authorized this research."
"But that's against the law," Cassa protested, eyes wide and fearful at the thought of her mother getting into trouble.
"Not in Mandalorian controlled space," The Yuuzhan Vong Shaper said with a lopsided smile. "Your mother is wise, has ties to people who have great knowledge of biochemistry on Mandalore. They, in conjunction with Yuuzhan Vong who now call themselves Mandalorian, have made this 'vaccine' against Omega Blue and Alpha Red. If you wish a set of 'clothing' it will be of little bother to Shape one with immunity to Omega Blue."
"If this gets out," Josat practically rasped, his eyes wide. They may all be young, but even they could understand some of the implications of a Yuuzhan Vong species immune to the galaxy's only sure-fire weapon against them. There wasn't a day that went by when someone from the True Victory party tried to urge the Senate to act against the Yuuzhan Vong colonies. If that safety blanket was removed…
"Go mom," Cassa said softly, her crystal green eyes darting to the others present. They all knew how important the Yuuzhan Vong were to her, and mimed zipping their lips in silent reassurance. She then looked back to Ben. "Your call, Ben."
"It's not like the dark Jedi are going to be coming out of the woodwork today or tomorrow, or even several years from now," Ben shrugged. "How about creating a prototype and then saving it to one of those living computers…"
"*Qahsa*," Jedis'sei supplied.
"Those. Create a prototype and then store the blueprint away in case we need to mass produce them."
"Should we tell your dad, or one of the other instructors?" Josat looked to Ben as well. "I know Master Tekli might be able to help. She's really good at Yuuzhan Vong biotech."
"We can tell my Master," Jedis'sei offered. The lithe, red Twi'lek shared a master with Cappricia as they both had a shared interest in preserving the past and uncovering things thought 'lost' to the ages. "Master Sitra is open-minded. Might even be able to help us hide the data in case the *Qahsa* is damaged."

"We can tell my mom and dad for sure," Cassa added with a nod. "They can use their contacts to even improve on whatever designs we come up with."
"The more people who know, the bigger the risk," Ben warned. "Master Shaper, how long do you think it will take for a set of 'clothes' to be ready?"
"A week. It is simply a matter of making a standard set of garments more 'Force' resistant by modifying the genetic structure of…"
"A week. Great," Ben held up his hand. "Sorry, Chatterbox and Furball are the science-y people."
"Understandable," the Master Shaper chuckled.
"I do have one question," Josat said.
"Yeah?"
"How are we going to know if it works or not? It's not like we'll go searching the galaxy for a random dark Jedi to blast lightning at you with."
"Do you think your old master could help put?" Jun asked Ben.
Ben shook his head. "No. In addition to the congratulations message he sent me, he also told me he's playing diplomat on his flag the *Anakin Skywalker*, trying to keep a Galactic Alliance fleet group and a Mando fleet group from shooting at each other."
"The *Skywalker*?" Jun tilted his head. "Oh right, that new *Nebula*-class Star Destroyer the Jedi Order acquired a couple years back. Named after your granddad right?"
"Jacen wanted the people to remember the hero Anakin Skywalker was, and not the thing he became," Ben confirmed. "It's a cool looking ship. Jacen took me on it once. Painted all black so it blends in with the stars. The crew called it the *Black Annie* because of it."
"Well, if Master Solo is busy, then who can help us? Cassa, your dad?" Josat asked again.
"Dad's too busy with GAG stuff. He won't tell me the details, but apparently someone killed two Jedi Knights and kidnapped a Force-sensitive child they were collecting. He even had to cancel his visit this weekend because of all the political pressure to get some answers."
Cassa shook her head. "Blast it. Where's a friendly, Sith lightning user when you need one?"
"I'll come up with something," Ben said after a moment of thought. "You guys focus on the tangible. I'll go for the intangible."
"Considering we're making a forbidden Yuuzhan Vong set of clothing designed to negate Force attacks, should I hope for the Force to be with us?" Josat asked.
The young Jedi all blinked, actually considering his words.

Finally Ben nodded. "Might as well. Just because us regular Jedi can't be like Cassa and sense the Yuuzhan Vong, doesn't mean the Force ignores them."
"Okay then, let's hope this crazy idea works and doesn't blow up spectacularly in our faces and get us grounded. Oh, and that the Force is with us. Because, unlike our government, the Sith actually believe we Jedi exist. And if this is all we're doing to get ready for them, can you imagine the crazy plans the dark Jedi are working on?"
[-V-]
"Time to get up you two," Alema Rar chuckled, barging into the room without care. "We have some crazy plans to implement."
"Don't we always, Master?" Zevia Nist asked, blinking the sleep from her eyes as she untangled herself from Valin. It was slightly amusing to the Twi'lek considering that the geometric tattoos that covered both their bodies appeared to mesh perfectly in their current intertwined state.
Then, remembering Zevia had asked a question, Alema blinked. "Well yeah."
"Then are how these plans any different?" Valin said dryly, sliding out of bed after Zevia.
"For one, you're going to get a promotion," Alema chuckled. Both her apprentices stopped dressing to look at her in surprise.
"Promoted?" Valin asked carefully.
"Uh huh, your contributions to the cause have been duly noted, and Darth Krayt believes its time you were made a Darth."
"Congratulations, my Lord," Zevia bowed her head towards Valin.
"I'll still be Valin to you," Valin said, giving her a small kiss on the top of her head.
"Yes, my Lord," Zevia said with a hint of a grin.
Alema watched the interactions with a whimsical smile on her face. This is exactly what she had planned for when she had 'forced' the two to work together for the better part of the last six years. Just as she had had Anakin in that asteroid of darkness, she had wanted to give the both of them a small light to cling to, something to preserve their humanity in the darkness that surrounded them all. Then again, as she watched them kiss passionately, she had her limits. "Okay, enough mushiness you two."
"We need to find you someone too, Master," Zevia said perkily, finishing pulling on the rest of her clothing as if she hadn't just had a heavy make-out session in front of her master.

"The candidates on this planet leave something to be desired," Alema deadpanned. "And never mind me. If you two were listening I said 'plan*s*' as in more than one."
"Oh, this should be good," Valin replied. "Multi-part plans always end up getting some One Sith killed for some reason. Lady Sani, Lord Brutalis last year, Lord Drakin the year before that. Are we going after Morto's top agent, Dician? She's in deep cover right now, right? We blow it and Morto loses his key pawn."
"Don't underestimate Dician," Alema shook her head, sending both her apprentices a warning glare. "She's far more dangerous than she appears. Knows Force techniques that most of Krayt's circle would kill to know. We try to go up against her, and one of us will most likely end up dead."
"Her?" Valin said incredulously. He tried to imagine the petite, innocent-in-appearance dark skinned woman as a threat. The light, musical quality of her voice often reminded him of his sister in their younger days before the Yuuzhan Vong War. In fact, if there was any in Darth Krayt's circle that stood out as 'not belonging', it was Dician.
"She was Lady Sani's shadow apprentice," Alema nodded. "I only just learned that by accident. And we all know how close Lady Sani got to discrediting us to Darth Krayt."
"Okay, so we're not going after Dician? Who then? Morto himself?" Valin said, putting on his ancient Sith mask and pulling his hood over his head.
"No one."
"No one?"
"Nope," Alema shook her head. She started to explain the intricacies of One Sith hierarchy again. Valin had made 'Lord' two years into his stay on Korriban, developing a reputation of his own. But since then, inter-Sith politics had kept him at that rank. Not that he minded. For Zevia, however, the dark-haired young woman seemed content to remain an acolyte, even if her own abilities were almost on par with a Lady of the Sith. "As a Darth, Val, you get command of your own faction. Can even take an apprentice or two if you want. What we're going to do after you get promoted is use your new position and see how we can make our position in the One Sith even stronger. But for now, Darth Krayt is expecting you."
The trio left the Tomb of Ajunta Pall and was greeted by the early morning light of the Korriban sun. The years had been kind of the One Sith, their numbers ever growing. In the main courtyard, there were even groups of non-Force sensitives in blood-red armor, honing their blaster and vibroblade skills. The Peace of a Millennium hadn't so much

as ridded the galaxy of crime and undesirables as force them underground even further. Those lucky few who came in contact with One Sith operatives were sent on their way to Korriban to form the backbone of their fledgling empire. In fact, the time to reveal themselves was fast approaching, with various operatives already in position to deal a crippling blow to the Jedi and the greater government.

"The Galactic Alliance is never going to know what hit them," Valin shook his head as they walked through the training grounds.

"Yup," Alema said neutrally.

They entered the main building, the abundance of dark side Force energy washing over them. The only other physical occupant in the building now was Darth Krayt himself. Everyone else, Wyyrlock included, were getting themselves in position throughout the galaxy in preparation for their attack.

"Approach, Lord Moderus," Darth Krayt ordered.

Zevia and Alema stayed where they were at the doorway as Valin did as bidden. Valin had taken on the name Moderus, or He Who Walks the Middle Road in old Sith tongue, to show his disdain for extremes. The reasoning he had explained to the inner-circle was that both Jedi and Sith weakened themselves if they distanced themselves too far away from the teachings of the other. Only by understanding could one truly be as strong in the Force as possible. Of course, that hadn't exactly gone over too well, with then newly made Lord Morto protesting against the 'un-Sith' quality of the name. But his concerns were brushed aside, and Valin had spent the last four years among the One Sith as Lord Moderus.

"Remove your mask," Darth Krayt said to Valin.

Valin did, going to one knee in the process. "My Lord."

"You are very much like your master," Darth Krayt chuckled, shaking his head. "I can sense her viperous influence coursing through you. Common sense dictates I should kill you before you turn your fangs on me."

Valin didn't even twitch. "Then do so, my Lord. I live only to serve the One Sith."

"If you had failed that last mission I gave you, I would have," Darth Krayt said. "But when you cut down those two Jedi Knights trying to collect a Force-sensitive child, and even better, made it seem like Mandalorian fanatics were at fault, you proved your dedication."

"They were hardly a challenge, my Lord. They seemed more surprised to see me among the living than anything else. I could not let them report back to their superiors."

"Indeed. And by besting two Jedi Knights, you are clearly deserving of the honor I will bestow upon you. Like your master, you will be granted the title of Darth, and all the rights and respect that title brings. So rise, Darth Moderus, and continue to serve the One Sith as loyally as you and your master have done."

Valin rose and replaced his mask, drawing on the dark side surrounding him to enhance his presence. His eyes shown with the added power, and he smirked behind his mask. "I promise you, my Lord. I will do just that."

[-Story End-]